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-in a daze-

ICCG
文庫

Kagerou Days I

—My vision was spinning around. The world turns black and white in an instant. In the middle of it all, there aren't any clouds in the blue and red sky... Red, a red signal, and...! The intense contrast of the two colors was burning my corneas.

Just what is spreading out from my eyes?

The idiotic call of a cicada pierced my ears.

The smell of iron mixes with your scent.

Almost as though all my senses were beating directly into my brain.

On the crosswalk, a burnt tire mark and a red line the same size as your little body were drawn. Now, I knew I couldn't do anything, but I still ran next to you. As I swallow, the haze pushes the truth into my eyes, nose, and head.

The one who is here isn't you.

Not the you I was talking to until now.

It's only a mass of some sort of red lump.

Even if anyone says so, this thing isn't you.

I feel nauseated and my head starts to hurt. My eyes were blurred like I was trying opening them under water, *plosh plosh* drops of water started falling on the asphalt. It looks like the water is dropping from my eyes.

My mouth starts moving as I try to talk, but I wonder if it was erased by the sound of the cicadas or if the voice never came from the start, I couldn't hear anything at all.

I have to tell you.

Just now did I decide to tell you.

I have to quickly tell you.

The more I sway, the closer the heat haze seems to be.

It was standing there laughing, trying to get between you and me.

Please don't get in my way, I must tell her now.

You can laugh the as much as you want afterwards. But now, please leave us alone.

This is very late, and you can feel disgusted, but...

The way that you're a bit selfish,
and your habit of beating when you're embarrassed,
and the smell of your fluttering hair, all of it.

—I, loved you the most.

Chapter 1: Artificial Enemy

Translated by sailorena and mudskipperkip

I woke up to the sound of a piercing siren. All at once, my heart began to throb violently. I looked up to see a white ceiling projected above me. Still unable to completely understand the situation, I fell from my bed, knocking over a small side table.

“.....Ah!”

I hit my right shin hard, the burning pain registering in my brain moments later.

As my eyes filled with tears of pain and fear of the explosive sound, I gathered up the futon which had fallen in the avalanche, and as I wrapped it around my body, the sound of the siren stopped.

“Good morning, Master!”

The moment I heard that voice, I fully grasped the situation I was in.

There was me—the teary-eyed Kisaragi Shintaro—in an unnatural position, wearing only underwear, with a futon wrapped around me, and a girl—Ene—looking on from inside the monitor, teary-eyed from trying to hold back her laughter.

A hot, summer day. Not long ago, society had made a huge deal about the end of the world and the like. Meteorite impacts, the downfall of the Mayan civilization,

etc. Now, the top news consisted of peaceful topics like, “It’s been decided that the ultra-popular idol will star in her first TV drama!”

For someone like me, whose job was to be extraordinarily well-informed about top news stories, and had fought in the front lines of heated discussions about the apocalypse controversy on the internet, I have to say that the current topics lacked punch. Well, that said, my job was primarily one of an ordinary 18-year-old, high school boy. But at the time, I conducted voluntary home confinement while exchanging comments with the inhabitants of the internet. In my spare time, I protected my home, diligently serving as a guardsman.

As for the basics of my work, I’d started producing amateur music from scratch and, on the side, would always leave comments of love, and comments of criticism, on new videos of a certain video website. I’d had this job for more than two years already.

Incidentally... I had yet to make anything.

But today, I was unusually full of motivation!

Plopped down in front of my computer, I stuffed myself with the sandwich my mom had given me that morning while glaring at the step recording software on the screen. My goal was to get a first place ranking on a certain video site, then a ringtone and karaoke delivery, and finally, a major album.....!

After all is said and done, I wanted to be made into a big deal.

Normally, that high ambition was in vain, and in a matter of ten minutes, it would fall to ruins, comments of criticism from artisans becoming the default. With the exception of my mother’s love in this sandwich, I wondered what special ingredient it contained. As if a god had descended, the phrases kept on pouring out.

“This.....This’ll sell!!”

I said this aloud, and steadily continued to work the software. Even though I was doing unbelievably well composing something, I was filled with fear. Since

earlier, something that I would call a “virus” was darting about inside the monitor, as if it intended to interfere with my work.

“It seems like today is going to be a considerably hot day. Wow! The expected high is 35°C in central Tokyo!

“What. It seems that, already, in central Tokyo, around ten people have been transported for heat stroke. Master, when you go out, you must not forget to take steady measures!”

I’m unable to understand why someone would go out on a day like this.

Or perhaps I should say, I’m unable to understand why someone would go out in the first place.

“Oh, right. About today’s siren, it’s an alert used in a certain country for danger levels four or higher. I increased the frequency to the level Master would hate the most—”

“What do you mean by ‘today’s siren’! You’re planning one for tomorrow too?!Ah.”

I’d just dug myself even deeper. This was bad.

Moving from right to left in the monitor, she suddenly came to a standstill after bringing up that random topic. She drew up close to the screen with a smile, almost as if to say, “Bingo!” and continued cheerfully, “Oh, it’s completely spoiled now, isn’t it~? In that case, I’ll have to prepare something even more exciting for tomorrow! Oh no, you needn’t pay me, since you’re my guest.”

“What are you, some kind of salesman!? Didn’t I get this bruise because of you!? Isn’t this an accident resulting in injury!?”

As she let out an ominous laugh while rubbing her hands together, I pointed out my pitiful bruise marks, frantically referring to them.

But such resistance was also in vain, as a question mark appeared above her, and she only tilted her head with a completely innocent face.

3 AM on August 14th. The sound of the siren that suddenly echoed throughout the house had even woken up my mother.

As my mother came running into my room, the thing that met her eyes was the “pretty girl” on the display, but the one her angry shouts were directed at was her son.

The angry shouts that rang out seemed like they’d disturb the neighbors much more than the siren would, and just as I thought I saw a clenched fist appear before my eyes, it became morning.

And that is how I had arrived to the present moment. I hadn’t looked in a mirror, but I was sure that I now had bruises on my face, too.

“Give me a break already, seriously..... What am I gonna do if my PC breaks.....? I really would die.”

“Awww, Master, how kind of you to worry about me before yourself! You came up to me straight away when you woke up this morning, too, didn’t you!?”

While her eyes glittered gaudily, like in an old-fashioned shoujo manga, and she zoomed in to fill the whole screen, I yelled furiously at her again.

“That was so I could delete you!! Also, if I lose my PC, I really mean that I would die!!”

“Oh, you’re just being modest again..... Master is such a virtuous gentleman..... So dreamy!”

She wasn’t listening.

She really wasn’t listening at all. I’d had enough already.

How did things even become like this.....

About a year ago, a mysterious e-mail had arrived from an anonymous sender. I had no way of knowing any better at the time, but after I’d opened it, my life became so stressful it was almost laughable.

As soon as “she”, who had been lurking in the e-mail’s attached data, infiltrated my computer, everything in the terminal had become occupied in an instant.

At that time, I didn't know what the heck had happened. I ignored the overlapping application windows, and just when I thought I saw a geometrical effect spread across the whole desktop, a beautiful girl, with blue hair in pigtails, materialized there, her entire body shining with a faint glow.

At first sight, I thought she looked kind of "cute".

There was once such a time. Yes, certainly, there was.

She, who had so suddenly appeared, gave off an atmosphere you'd often find with the main heroine of a story. Something like, "You're the one that helped me, right.....? Please, let us fight together....."

At that time, as an inhabitant of a cluttered room at the very bottom of society, I was pleased with thinking, "I've pulled the hero card!" and that starting from now, I would fight a mysterious organization, everywhere paranormal events would unfold, mysterious monsters would appear and comrades would join forces.....! Such a thrilling story for the first episode; it was too perfect of a chance meeting to just be a misunderstanding.

Or so it had seemed.

Well... not one supernatural power was awakened, no demon eye opened up; nothing, much less the comrades I requested, arrived. The closest thing to a monster's appearance was a cockroach. To begin with, our very first conversation when we met had gone something like, "Ah, from today forward, please treat me well~"

"Oh, okay....."

I've never heard lines like that in any action/adventure movie.

We started out with that personal narrative.... Although it actually wasn't even that deep, we'd still managed to have a decent conversation.

"What in the world are you? I've never even seen or heard of software like this...."

At that time, I'd asked that in strangely polite tones, and the reply I got was,
"I'm not too sure myself~"

That's basically how it went.

Still, it was a good start. Since she at least answered my question.

Maybe it was because she'd warmed up to me after a week passed, but her eccentric behavior gradually became more noticeable as she began interfering with my work and blatantly pestering me. The folder in which I'd accumulated embarrassing, sentimental lyrics was renamed to "PIG FEET," and the folder with my collection of carefully-selected treasured images was changed to "Graveyard of Sexual Desire"

It took about a month for that renaming festival to make its way throughout my PC, and even the demo of the song I made was changed to a title so sentimental, it made it seem like I thought something like, "If I can make an album with this, then I can pioneer a new genre of music....."

Naturally, I held back angry shouts each time, so much that my throat burned, but since it didn't seem like it would have much effect, I refrained from vocalizing them.

"Hey..... You changed my password, didn't you?"

Since that morning, I hadn't been able to log into the video site at all. But I didn't recall changing my password. When it comes to this, she's usually the one to blame.

"Ohh! As I would expect from you, Master! I'm so glad you've noticed!"

"Change it back.....Now....."

"Come on, what's the rush? With that said, I've prepared something special!"

A box asking "Do you want to save?" appeared, the "NO" option below it was selected, and in an instant all the windows displayed on the screen were, not minimized, but closed.

"Gyaaaaaah!!!"

After that, a four-choice quiz reminiscent of Golden Thursday was displayed on the monitor.

“Alright, first question! If you answer this correctly, I’ll tell you the first pass—”

“Are you stupid!? I’ll die, you know!? Oi!! The song!! Oi!!”

I rose from my chair and shouted at the monitor. I wonder how ridiculous I looked while doing so. The person in front of me had an expression that seemed to say, “Wow... What a dangerous person...”

It’s your fault I’m acting like this in the first place.

“Haa....aah~.....”

Suddenly losing my strength, I held my head and laid it down on the desk. In that instant, there was an unpleasant sensation of my elbow hitting something.

“Ah!! Master, Master!! Your drink!!”

“Eh?”

——My partially-consumed soda had spilled onto my keyboard and mouse.

Twice now, a shriek echoed throughout the room. I dabbed the keyboard with tissues in a panic.

The sugary liquid had soaked into it, causing the worst case scenario to go through my mind.

It was no use thinking about it. Right now, I had to concentrate on saving this life with my body and soul!

I finished wiping up, then frantically pressed each input key. Only the “o,r,t” keys worked.

It seemed that I was too late. Tears of regret rolled down my cheeks.

“Master! The mouse, the mouse!”

That voice brought me back. That’s right, there might still be a life I could save!

Holding back tears, I picked up the mouse.

“I beg of you.....! Come back.....!”

While my voice leaked out, I continued to dab it with tissues with utter devotion. A questionable amount of time passed, and once again, I checked to see if there was a response. Only the right click worked. The menu appeared almost mockingly.

How much more unreasonable could this world be?

What had they ever done to deserve this? It was just too cruel.

“Oh! Master, you can type tororo! Ah, wait, totor—”

“Just...stop talking.....already.....”

I wanted to give into my urge to just dispose of my computer, and her with it, but I would die doing that. My hand covered my face as I wallowed in this hopeless feeling, letting myself be engulfed by the anger that had no outlet to release.

———A moment of silence. The sound of the air conditioner filled the room, carrying in fresh cold air from underneath that gradually cooled off my entire body, all the way up to my head. Right. And here was the most annoying thing about her. In the past, each time I was driven mad by her odd behavior, I would delete her. However, there must have been backups on the internet, so as long as my computer was connected to it, she would always be revived right after being deleted, as if nothing had happened. Then, in that case, maybe the solution was to go offline? Of course, it was obvious that I wouldn't be able to endure a few hours of that kind of hell. And thus, this vicious cycle was born.

I was sure that she was a threat created by somebody's hand. An enemy, hence the name “Ene”. I didn't know who it could have been... but to give such a ridiculous personality to a hyper AI like this, they definitely had to be someone unpleasant.

“Phew.....” I breathed out. I had already experienced this series of arguments many times before. But today, there were just too many different things that

had piled up. Anyone else would probably go crazy if they were subjected to her excessive level of harassment. If I did say so myself, I thought it was pretty impressive that I'd come this far.

I wanted someone to praise me, but regrettably, I was alone. As a hikineet, it was hopeless.

I wonder how much time passed as those unproductive thoughts circled around in my mind. Suddenly, I noticed that there was a strange silence. Although I had told her to stop talking, it was rare that she ever actually listened to what I said. Slowly, I moved my eyes to the display, and was met with a completely unexpected scene.

In the middle of the screen was information for possible delivery dates of numerous consumer electronics mail order sites. However, that wasn't what surprised me. What surprised me was that she was glancing over at me with her head bowed apologetically.

The moment our eyes met, she averted her gaze, mumbling, "Ah, well, um...." and pointed at the already-dead keyboard and mouse.

"Well, um.... I-I didn't think things would get this bad.... I just wanted to play a little prank, so....."

What was she talking about.....? I tilted my head in confusion, but then when I saw that she seemed to be waiting for some kind of response, I finally understood.

"Eh.....? Could it be that you feel guilty about it.....?"

".....Ah!"

Taken aback, she immediately looked down.

Her legs were fidgeting, and for some reason, they made me remember the feeling of our first meeting, and I averted my gaze, as well. A mysterious tension formed between us. I-in any case, I had to say something.....!

"Well, since it's already happened, there's nothing we can do about it.....A-and

they were getting old, so I'd been thinking about changing them out soon anyways....."

As I finished speaking and looked back at the display, she already had her back to me and was in the middle of looking through each of the mail order sites.

"Riiight~?! I was just thinking about how you'd be better off buying new ones! Actually, it was a miracle they lasted as long as they did~ I'd say it was a peaceful death, don't you think so!?"

I was speechless.

Have I ever experienced a feeling this ambiguous?

It was neither extreme anger nor sorrow, but only the feeling of nothingness that passed through my heart.

"Huh? Oh, well this isn't good~....."

As I started to surrender to that sensation, her sudden comment pulled me back.

"What's the matter? I'm fine with anything as long as it works, so hurry up and find me a site that does same day deliveries."

"Well, about that.... I guess I'm a bit to blame for this."

"Way more than just a bit."

"Master, since I think you'll die within a day or two without either of those....."

"Pretty much."

"I figured. So, I tried looking around, but..... Master, what's today's date?"

"Hm? It's the 14th..... right? I think so..... ah!"

Startled, I looked at all the search results pulled up on the display.

All of them said "no same day delivery."

"It's the Obon Festival, so none of them will do deliveries until the day after tomorrow."

I could feel dizziness coming on.

"The day after tomorrow.....? Two days.....?"

Unable to help it, I leaned back into my chair.

Two days. For a normal person, that probably wouldn't seem like very long at all.

However, to me, there could be a matter of life or death no greater than this.

It was like going two days without food.

Or two days straight without sleep.

— — — However, this was something on an entirely different level.

It was almost as if I'd been told to stop breathing.

Can you hold your breath for two days? No, it shouldn't be possible.

Since I'd started living this way two years ago, my body was practically useless unless I had access to the internet. While I did have a cell phone, for some reason, the reception in our house was really bad. Or perhaps I should say, I hadn't used it for so long, I wasn't sure if it even still worked properly.

It was good that the PC itself wasn't broken, but with the operation terminal completely dead, it was practically a useless box. If the one sitting inside of the display were even the least bit sympathetic, this situation might not be so serious. If only I could give her instructions and have her carry out the operations for me.

However, having to spend two days with her would probably result in death via a hole opening in my stomach due to stress or something.

Up until now, I'd been able to prevent any holes from opening up by basically ignoring her whenever she talked to me, but would I have to ask her for every little thing from now on? If I really proposed that idea, she would probably agree in a heartbeat, with her eyes shining like she'd just acquired a brand new toy.

In fact, she'd already been staring closely at me since earlier, as if to say, "Come on..... You don't have a choice anymore, right.....? Just give in already.....!"

— — — I already had two paths laid out in front of me.

Would I give up my PC and die, or die once I'd become her plaything?

"My options suck....."

A feeling of hopelessness escaped my mouth together with a sigh.

To be honest, even I found it ridiculous, but I'm positive that I would die if I really did go offline. I'm not even joking. Tears started to form in my eyes when I saw that death was my only option in this extremely idiotic situation.

".....Well~"

"What is it.....?"

"Well, um..... I'm sure you're also thinking the same thing, but... since I'm the one that overdid it a little this time....."

As she said this, she bowed her head again, like how she'd tricked me earlier, combined with more fidgeting motions.

"What's with your lack of variation in apologies! You won't fool me anymore!"

"N-no, really!! Wait just a minute, I'm telling the truth! I really do regret it! I'll make it up to you by doing anything you ask for three, or even four, days!"

She started making mysterious claims, and had the screen zoom in towards her face dramatically.

"Huh?"

"I mean, until the order arrives, I don't mind acting as a replacement keyboard, or anything else you need! I won't mess around, either! I'll do everything just as you tell me to.....! Really, I will....."

With slightly teary eyes, the screen zoomed into her face even more.

She.....! She had this kind of variation.....?

image

For an 18-year-old male's virgin heart to beat so rapidly over something so simple. How pitiful.

However, while I did think that I couldn't simply just give in here, she had been seriously looking at mail order sites since a while ago, so maybe she truly did feel guilty.....?

Just as I started to think this, I noticed that there were some words displayed behind her.

What was it.....?

When I looked at the window behind her, in the bottom left, the question for the four-choice quiz app was in the process of being rewritten.

“Question #1:

If you answer this question correctly, I will input a single letter of the word that Master wishes to search! However, if you answer incorrectly, I'll post Master's prized image collection, one image at a time, onto the internet for everyone to see. Therefore, please answer with care——”

“.....Oi.”

Her eyes continued to water with tears, and she tilted her head cutely in confusion.

However, I no longer felt anything anymore.

“That thing behind you.”

“.....?.....Ah!”

Flustered, she turned around and closed the app, and as if nothing had happened, she went back to staring at me with teary eyes. Her expression had clearly become more awkward than before, and as if to reflect this, the tears in her eyes increased.

“.....”

“U-umm~.....?”

“.....I've had enough.”

“Eh?”

—Two years. I became immersed in sentimentality as I started recalling various memories, but I didn't have a choice anymore; I had to do this in order to survive.

I rose from my chair and opened my closet. Given that I didn't even go out into the neighbourhood, I only had to rotate between a couple sets of clothes. For that reason, my dresser was basically unused.

But today... just for today, I would open it.

"M....Master!?"

I heard a surprised voice from behind me, in tone that'd be used if saying something like, "It can't be!"

Taking the first step, I looked at my hooded parkas and jerseys which were neatly displayed.

The memories of isolation from back when I used to wear these came flooding back all at once.

"Ugh....."

As I remembered this and that of the past, I was struck by a feeling similar to that of an old, throbbing wound. I violently shook my head, picked up the folded jersey that was at the very top of the far right side, and then closed the drawer.

Moving onto the second step, I took out the cargo pants and shorts that were also neatly folded. From there, I selected a pair of khaki cargo pants, and again, promptly closed the drawer.

"Master! What's wrong!?"

I took off the sweats that I had been wearing up until then, and as I put on the clothes which I had selected, she panicked as if I'd done something very serious.

"You've never been dressed like that before! What's the meaning of this.....?"

".....Shopping."

"Eh.....?"

"I'm going shopping! Is there anything wrong with that?!"

"Shop....ping.....?"

It seemed like she hadn't expected that reply.

What else did she think I would be doing after this?

"That's right..... I'll just go buy it myself. Since you haven't been of any help."

"Shopping.....!? You sure surprised me! I thought you were going off to die or something of the sort!"

"Of course not! What kind of guy would die just from soda being spilled on the keyboard?!"

"Well... Master, for one..."

".....Fair enough....."

It didn't seem like something I wouldn't do. While unfortunate, it was fact that I had considered that very thing not too long ago.

We continued to banter back and forth while I proceeded to get dressed.

".....Well, I guess this'll do."

I pulled the zipper up until it reached the top of the jersey, and with that, I had finished changing.

The slightly-stiff clothes that I hadn't worn in a while made me feel nervous for some reason, as if I was wearing them for the first time.

"Wow~! You actually look pretty cool! Although, I think this puts an end to your old look."

"Oh..... really? Is that alright.....?"

"It's completely fine! You look handsome!"

"Really? I feel kind of embarrassed now...."

While embarrassed, but with feelings that weren't altogether bad, I turned to face the screen to see images lined up of first-class, good-looking fashion models. And from the other side of the images, I could only hear a voice saying, "You really do look so cool! It's just the fashion sense I would expect!"

"You're bringing me down, so just.... quit it already....."

“Eh? How come?”

“Forget it. I get it already.....”

In an instant, all of my enthusiasm for the outing was stripped away. However, I didn't intend to back out of it at this point.

I removed the bag hanging in my closet, and hung it around my neck.

I'd finished preparations for the most part. I just had my small belongings left to tackle.

“Let me see, wallet, and..... Guess I don't really need anything else.”

I picked up my wallet, which I usually only used when paying for mail orders, from beside my bed.

“I guess that's everything. Phew..... Well, time to get going, then.”

I took a deep breath, and approached the door to my room.

“W-wait just a minute, Master!!”

The moment I put my hand on the door, I heard a voice calling for me to stop, and I looked back towards my computer.

“What.....? I'm already leaving, so don't do any more weird things.”

“Well.... Um, hasn't it been a while since you've last last gone out? So that's why I was thinking, um..... Wouldn't two people be better than one~?”

“Two? It's not like I have anyone I can invite.”

After living two years like this, I didn't have a single friend who I could still contact now. Well, even if I did, it wasn't like I'd invite them, anyway.

“No, that's not really what I meant..... Umm..... I mean, if it were me, I could serve as a navigator or something, so.....”

The way she was acting seemed to heavily imply something. Of course, it was obvious that she was trying to tell me to take her along, but what was I supposed to do? Carry my computer with me?

“How are you even supposed to come? Fine, I'll bring you along, so come on out, if you can.”

“Eh? Really!? Okay, I’ll come out right now, so……!”

She smiled, pointing at the small dresser beside my bed.

——On top of it was a dust-covered, touch screen cell phone.

A hot, summer day. Truly, a hot, summer day. Had summer always been this hot?

Having been blessed by the air-conditioned indoors up until a while ago, I was now gushing so much sweat I thought I could hear it sizzle.

It’d only been twenty seconds. Although I’d managed to walk outside, my life points were diminishing before my eyes.

“Ah~ testing, testing. Master, can you hear me? Ah~ ah~”

“……Should I go back now……?”

“Eh? Did you say something? Please speak a little closer~”

“No…… it’s nothing……”

The owner of this uninterested voice probably couldn’t even feel the heat. It was something to be envious about.

Wearing in-ear-canal earphones, as well as having my phone set up almost like a transceiver, I wondered if I looked something like a strategist carrying out an operation.

Playing the siren that was used that morning, I was threatened to recruit friends on the bulletin board of my high school’s homepage using my real name, and, in the end, was pressured into giving into bringing her along.

On the display screen, Ene was grinning from ear to ear as if she were the phone’s wallpaper. However, she didn’t seem to have any intention of calmly playing that role, and was instead moving around rapidly.

To think that the day would come where I’d be forced into an operation by a

program.....

Though the operator was more like some kind of terrible, modern plague.

Arriving at the public roads, I was finally reminded of the summer's attack power.

Further down the road, the heat-haze swayed.

I felt like how a creature from the North Pole or the Antarctic would feel if they were suddenly thrown out into the savanna.

"Hot." The exact humidity or temperature didn't matter.... It was just "hot."

"Are you serious.....? Was summer always like this.....?"

"Didn't I say so a while ago? Today, it seems there's quite a number of people being transported to the hospital for heatstroke. Ah, Master, did you bring your insurance card?"

"I did... so it'll be okay if I'm transported anytime, geez...."

When I left the house, I brought various things so I'd be prepared if anything happened.

Even in the worst case scenario that I collapsed somewhere, I would have my identification on me.

"Ohh! Then there's nothing to worry about! Now then, let's walk briskly!"

"Alright.... —wait, why are you saying that?! It's your fault in the first place that this—"

"Ah! Master, you should have turned right on the intersection just now! Right!"

"Eh? That road just now? Oh, my bad... Somehow, I don't remember the route at all. Honestly, I don't know which way is which anymore."

"Master really doesn't go out, does he? The last time you went outside was two years ago, wasn't it? The map has completely changed since then, you know?"

Being too focused on the heat, I wasn't really aware, but it did seem to have

changed considerably.

There was a ridiculously huge building of some kind, and several newly-constructed apartment buildings; the slight bit of information that I remembered was now entirely useless. Was this what they called urban development? I'd lived in this city for a long time, but it shouldn't have been possible for things to be altered so drastically in just two years. Or could it be because I had been confined in my room, that it was just the difference I felt from going out for the first time in so long?

Almost as if my own city was being redone by someone, little by little. I was hit by that kind of sensation.

The residents of this city, me included, probably go through their daily lives without even noticing the changes.

While thinking about this, I went back to the intersection, turned right as I was told, and saw the main street. Surprisingly, my house was situated in a fairly good location compared to here. The amount of traffic was reasonably high here, and a lot of people went by. On the street that came between the buildings on either side, the way people appeared and disappeared from left to right, and from right to left, didn't look much different from the display screen I stared at every day.

"Umm, from the next street, go to the left and keep following the road aaaall the way down. And then, to the right—..... Master?"

"Eh? Oh, y-yeah. I see. So, which way do I go now?"

"Like I said, the next street is to the left! And after that, right! What's wrong, Master? You've been spacing out a lot... Could it be that you have a heatstroke already?!"

"No, it's not that. I guess I just have a strange feeling.... Is there really a department store over there?"

There hadn't been a department store located there at least two years ago. When I thought of buying electronics, I remembered always having to make

quite a long trip to do so.

“I have no doubts. Umm... on the homepage, ‘The department store in your city! From furniture to home appliances to kitchenware, we stock everything’ is what’s written.Oh! But it only just opened last spring.”

“Oh..... No wonder I didn’t know. But why is it in a place like that.....”

“Hm~ But the areas surrounding here seem to be actively developed. If you go a little right from here, there’s a large hospital, and before that is a new school... and across from the school is a large library. It seems that all of these buildings were started last year, and finished up this year at about the same time.”

“Something like that is possible!? Somehow, it really seems to have changed... Oh, are we almost at the main street...?”

After exiting the one-way street, the panorama of the city spread out before me.

Billboards, roadside trees, office buildings and restaurants.

A student in uniform, an office worker apologizing profusely through a cell phone in one hand.

All of it emitting noise, noise, noise.

From this variety of unnecessary information, I felt something like dizziness.

“Ohh.... this feels impossible already. Should we go back? Okay, let’s go back.”

“There sure are a lot of people. So this is the power of the Obon holiday. Let’s do our best!”

“You really don’t listen to what I say, do you? Ahh~ There really are a lot of people...”

While there was maintenance going on, compared to the trail from earlier, it was much easier walking on the sidewalk, under the shade of the roadside trees.

However, the people and cars passing by on the streets made my body temperature rise considerably.

While muttering and grumbling, I went down the street and approached a

massive intersection.

“In the end, won’t you be going, ‘I’m dyingg~ I’m dyingg~,’ if you’re at home? Have a little more patience!”

“You—..... ahh, it’s no use. I don’t want to waste my strength trying to talk to you anymore. Oh, it’s green now. Should we cross.....?”

When I crossed the intersection once the signal turned green, I saw a park a little ways ahead. Swings, a jungle gym, water fountain, etcetera; there was a bunch of nice playground equipment lined up that kids probably wouldn’t be able to help but to rush up to play on. As I kept going, I saw a glimpse of a large, distinctive billboard above the right-hand side of the huge, department building that had been previously covered by the roadside trees.

“I-it looks a lot bigger than I thought....! They really built something like this....?”

“That’s because it seems to be the region’s largest department store! How about looking for clothes, too?”

“Idiot! Didn’t I say I was only going out for today? I’m sick of this hot world.”

“That’s true~! I thought you’d say that! Really, if Master said that he’d go to buy clothes, I’d have to dial 119*!”

“Am I a caveman!? I buy clothes, at least! Idiot!”

“Ohh, then will we be going to look at them?”

“N-no... it’s fine for today...”

As soon as I said that, I heard a chuckle that sounded like, “Pukkuku.....”

Feeling my face turn red, I stuffed my cell phone into my pocket.

“Uwaa! Master, it was a joke! Let’s come back another time, okay?”

Because the cell phone was in my pocket, she probably couldn’t hear my voice.

“Another time..... yeah,” I managed to mutter.

Using the billboard as a landmark, I saw another huge two-lane intersection. Separated by the row of buildings on the right-hand side, the department

building appeared on the other side of the intersection.

—The full picture could only be described by one word: “gigantic.”

The big parking lot was filled with cars to the point that I didn’t know how much ground it would cover if it were a tennis court, and from the road, there was a constant flow of cars coming in and out.

Beyond the rows of colorful cars, there was the department store that probably had more than ten floors, consisting of two buildings. On every floor, there was an arch-shaped pathway connecting them.

“.....This is amazing. They were able to complete something like this in two years.....?”

“Ah! We’re already here? Hey, Master~!?”

“I just crossed the intersection. We’re not there yet.”

“I want to see, too! Come on, Master~!”

“Geez, you’re so annoying! I get it! I get it, okay!”

If I ignored her too much, I’d be yelled at. I couldn’t stand that, so I took out my cell phone and faced the back of it, where there was a camera, in the direction of the department store. From an outsider’s point of view, I probably looked like I was taking a commemorative photo.

“Uwaa.....! This is truly amazing! It’s like a castle!”

“Well, coming this far, it does feel more like a castle than it does a department store.”

“Wow..... Ah! There seems to be an amusement park above the shops!! Let’s go!!”

Was she making full use of the vibration feature to express her joy? Her excitement was higher than it had ever been.

“No, we’re not going! Pretty much wherever we go, it’s not like you can do anything”

“Hmph.....”

The vibration stopped, and as soon as it did, only the sound of a text message

being received could be heard.

Of course, there was no way anyone would be sending a text to this phone, so it could only be her doing.

“.....? What is it?”

When I looked at the cell phone, she was glaring at me, agitated in a way that looked unusually aggressive.

“Master is really so tactless! Even I have places that I want to go see, you know!”

“Huh? Like I said, even if we go, you can’t ride the rides, so what’s so fun about that?! It’d be boring.”

“...tch! I don’t care anymore! Why don’t you just go shopping and ride the merry-go-round by yourself!”

“Like I said, I’m not riding it....”

The moment I thought I saw her scowl, the power turned off. But the time display hadn’t disappeared, so was it energy-saving mode? Anyway, the screen was pitch-black, and even the sound had turned off.

“Oi! What’s with you, o~i.....”

Even shaking the cell phone and pressing the buttons didn’t bring any change. The time display continued to read the elapsed time.

Currently, it was just after 12:30 PM.

“What’s with her.... I really don’t get her at all....—ow!”

Not long after crossing the intersection, I crashed into someone near the entrance to the department store lot—possibly because they were just standing there.

“Ah, I, sorr—“

Raising my face, when I saw those “eyes” that suddenly met with mine.... Time froze for a moment.

Despite it being this hot, summer day, they were wearing a long-sleeved, lavender parka., Their gaze was just barely visible from deep underneath the hood, but it seemed exceptionally cold and lifeless.

I was struck with a jolting sensation, as if I'd just seen something I shouldn't have, and then felt the sweat pour from my body.

“Um.... I.... Uh.... Er.... I-I'm sorr—“

I was embarrassed by how immediately obvious it was that I was socially incompetent. I cut my apology short, and lowered my face. It's over. I was going to be killed. Mom, thank you for everything up until now. At the very least, I wanted a girlfriend.

“.... It's fine, really. It was my bad.”

“Eh.....?”

When I raised my face, that person was gone without a trace.

There were a lot of people around, but it wasn't so crowded that a person could disappear instantly, or even if they moved right away, it wasn't as if they could have been blocked from sight even from a distance.

Feeling that I would collapse on the spot, I couldn't help but bend over with my hands on my knees. My heart started its delayed pounding, and as if in sync, sweat started dripping. It wasn't because it was my first time making contact with someone in a while, but because, without a doubt, those eyes were the coldest I'd ever felt in my life up until that moment. Surely, it wasn't because I'd bumped into them. But more than that... I felt the tranquility of not being able to imagine anything more complex.

“....—kay.....?”

“.... Eh?”

“I asked if you were okay.”

Taking my cell phone out of my pocket and looking at the screen, I wonder when it had turned back on. She was sitting in the center, but just like before,

she had her cheeks puffed out.

“Oh... you’re still there? I thought you disappeared not too long ag– ah”

Before I could finish my sentence, her face was already turning red right before my eyes. Was this bad? No, this was definitely bad. I’d never seen her become infuriated at something before, but it was obvious that it couldn’t be good.

“No, my bad! It was a joke! Really, my bad! Look, that amusement park-place on the roof! Let’s go there later! Okay?”

Just as soon as the red color was starting to cover her face, it went away, and her eyes shone to the point that I thought I could literally hear them sparkle.

Although it’d only been for an instant, this was definitely the wrong button. I’d been had.

“The amusement park!? Really? Master, just now, you said you’d go, right?!”

The phone was vibrating so much my hand felt like it would go numb, and her eyes were shining to the point of it being annoying.

“Eh.....? Ah.... y-yeah! Well, it’s fine once in a while!”

“It’s a promise, right!? Umm....! Ah! I like the one that goes up and down! Also, um, um!”

It was a more positive response than I thought, but even though I regretted it slightly in my mind, well, I didn’t feel bad about it.

What happened earlier with that guy didn’t even matter anymore.

I see. So even she is amazed by the outside world.

Things like smells and temperatures, because she can’t feel them, she might have always seen the outside world as a more attractive place than I did.

Passing through the gate, and while answering vaguely, “yeah, yeah” to every little request that came one after the other, I continued down the road on the lot.

The design of the cobblestone path that led to the entrance of the department store must have cost an unbelievable amount of money. With thorough

decoration, color-coded rectangular stones in every color were arranged together.

No doubt, it was based on some psychological image that an ordinary person like me wouldn't be able to understand.

Without comprehending even a bit of the creator's intention, I continued walking at a brisk pace, and arrived at the two towering buildings to the left.

Looking up at them from below, they were tall enough that they had the illusion of being able to reach the sky.

In front of the huge glass doors, there was an information board. This too, was elaborately decorated.

As if it were a luxurious painting, it was placed in a frame.

"Let's see, home appliances, home appliances..... Oh, seventh floor?"

"Anyway, after the ride that goes up and down, then it's the jet coaster. And after that, the ferris wheel too...."

"Aah, I get it already! I'll go!"

Because it was being repeated like a spell, even in my head, I was already imagining something like, "after the ride that goes up and down, then it's the jet coaster."

"Then let's get right down to shopping! Mouse! Keyboard!"

"First, drinks....."

When I stood in front of the automatic doors, they opened, and in that moment, I was greeted by a rush of cool air.

"Ahhh....."

It felt so good that my voice leaked out.

"Uwaa, Master, that's just gross, isn't it!?"

"Those are your first words to your Master that was dying up until now!?"

.....Crap.

I'd unintentionally yelled. All at once, I'd attracted the attention from families of customers enjoying their shopping in the special summer goods corner on the ground floor. A young boy was pointing at me and laughing innocently.

"Ah.... Ah, er.... Haha....."

They probably thought I was some weird guy for sure. While putting on a subtle fake smile, I hurriedly went to disappear into the elevator hall, putting on this show for the boy.

Don't you ever turn into someone like me, boy.

In the elevator hall that had its own independent area a short distance away from the shopping space, there were benches and vending machines lined up. Elderly people, and people comforting babies in strollers were seated there and taking a break.

"Vending machines.... Uooo.....!"

Somehow, after being patient while thinking, "Until I can make it here...." the time that I would acquire drinks had finally come.

I was so thirsty that every breath I took stuck in my throat.

Reaching into my wallet and taking out a thousand yen bill, I inserted it into the vending machine.

The target was the exquisite carbonated drink.

My chest was pounding with excitement thinking about the black sugar solution that would soon permeate this body.

I hastily pressed the button at the exact time it lighted up. Only 0.3 seconds. It was a fairly godly speed.

The clang sound was a pleasure to my ears. This was just one of the charms of vending machines. It was a sound I hadn't heard in so long that I was starting to get teary-eyed.

The can that I grasped in my hand was so chilled that you wouldn't think it was

something from this world.

Feeling the can with only the palm of my hand was a wasteful bliss. I was tempted to roll the can all over my body, but that would be just perverse.

At last, I put my finger on the pull tab and opened it. The hissing sound stimulated my ears once more, and the scent from the opened soda stroked my nasal passage.

I couldn't resist pouring it into my mouth. From the expression called permeating, it brought such a satisfaction that I could no longer speak—"...Master, you panting is really gross."

"Pwaaa.... Aaah...."

"This grossness isn't normal."

"Shut up! If you drank this, it'd end up up the same way! Totally."

"It would not. Anyway, the elevator's here!"

Of the four operating elevators that lined up, the door of the one on the far left opened, and people flooded out quickly. After it'd emptied, the guests that had been waiting on it filed in.

"Eh? Ah, it's fine, I'll get on the next one. Let me finish my drink first."

Answering with that, with gulping noises, I enjoyed the rich scent of the soda, and into my body the sugar solution—

"Ahhh! It left! Please drink faster!!"

"I just said I'd go on the next one! I'm drinking right now!!"

"No way.... If you don't hurry up, it's going to close!!"

"There's no amusement park that closes this early in the afternoon! Besides, there's a lot of elevators, either way."

The area in front of the elevators had become tightly packed, with people even lining up for them.

"I'll get on the next one for sure, so just relax and wait."

Ignoring the fact that she was making the phone buzz and ring with a rotating

vibration, my eyes wandered towards the elevators.

Even the up-down panel button could be pressed with the lightest touch. The design ensured ease of use, and it suggested the thoroughness of the management. Something like this department store's testimonials adorned the wall next to the elevator on the left.

"Huh, it says, 'With computer-managed, state-of-the-art disaster prevention technology, we guarantee your highest safety in any situation in this building.'"

"Is it state-of-the-art? Then, when it becomes next year, the 'state-of-the-art' part will be erased, right?"

"You're pointing out something really harsh..... Next year they'll put in next year's newest technology. Anyway, with all this décor, isn't the interior really impressive, too?"

"Ohh... somehow it seems like a lot of work."

"Doesn't it? Ah, it's here."

Above the elevator that was the closest to me, the number "1" flashed, and just like before, people suddenly flooded out. And just like before, once it had emptied, the guests that had been waiting crowded inside.

With where I was standing, it seemed I would be able to ride without a problem this time. Throwing away the empty can into a nearby garbage can, I just went along with the crowds to get into the elevator.

The people that had gotten in before seemed to have pressed the "7" button for the home appliances department, as the number on the panel was lit up in orange. It saved me a lot of trouble of trying to reach the button in the midst of the shoving, tightly-packed crowd. Reaching the limits of capacity, the doors of the elevator quickly closed and began to ascend. I could hear the air conditioning, but as expected with this many people in a cramped space, it was hot. I wanted to get off as soon as possible, but until reaching the seventh floor, the elevator practically stopped at every other floor; I was jostled by the constant exiting and entering of people, until it finally reached my destination.

The doors opened, and with a few other customers, I filed out.

There were summer clothes, swimming suits, and even food sales spread out on one floor. It was almost like entering a different world.

One side of the wall was entirely covered with a glass window, allowing sunlight to shine brightly into the store.

The unbelievable openness of the home appliances department gave off a magnificence like that of an office in a luxury building.

The first thing that caught my eye was the kitchen appliances corner. Products that didn't seem as if they could possibly fit in our small home were lined up, like a huge refrigerator that seemed big enough to store the whole head of pig, and a weapon-like rice cooker that you wouldn't think was only used to cook rice. There were multi-colored promotional signs with sales pitches like, "New product!" and "Very popular!" written in bold lettering. People with no interest, like me, however, wouldn't understand what it was trying to convey.

The extended pathway that served to divide the floor was probably forty meters long. In the back, there were upscale audio systems, and numerous state-of-the-art LCD televisions displayed on the wall.

"Woah, this place is huge! Isn't just this floor alone bigger than that one electronics store?"

Since it'd be a bother if she started making a fuss again, I continued towards the middle of the sales floor with the camera of my cell phone faced casually forward. Although they were simply large home appliances, seen from a wide distance, I wondered if most of the ones here were even affordable. At a glance, the salespeople that were cheerfully making announcements, too, were as many as a dozen.

"Master! What's that thing that looks like a bomb?!"

"That.....? What? Isn't that a pot? It sure has a big, grenade-like design."

Being aware that it clearly resembled a weapon, it was colored a solid viridian, with a lumpy design. If not for the meter on the side to tell the amount of remaining water, it completely looked like a dangerous object.

“It’s so cool……! Ah, Master, you said you wanted hot water, right!?”

“That was when I was eating cup noodles, and it was too much of a pain to go downstairs, wasn’t it? I don’t need something this rugged…… Anyway, if I have to go downstairs just to get water, it’s the same thing.”

“Eh~ why not? When you have guests over, it’ll surely become a topi— I’m sorry, I said too much....”

She made a meek face like she’d accidentally mentioned the death of my parents, and suddenly quieted down.

“Eh, what, can you stop?”

“Sorry, that was a really insensitive remark... I’ll be more careful.”

“Stop! Stop it! Anyway, what is this! This is an amazing design!”

While I meant to quickly change the topic to a stove that was displayed further down the aisle, to no surprise, it was from a maker I hadn’t heard of.

Furthermore, there was a paper pasted there, with “Sale on Stock!” written boldly, with the price being marked down as much as third of the original price.

“No, seriously! It’s simple, but this is amazing. Should I buy this and go back home?!”

“No matter how you think about it, isn’t this one unnecessary?! That bomb from earlier is way better!Anyway, Master, what did you come here to buy?!”

“Ohh, right, a mouse. Let’s hurry up and buy it so we can go home.”

“.....Master?”

Sending buzzing vibrations through my hand, I felt the atmosphere thicken.

“Yeah, I know! The amusement park! I didn’t forget about it! Um, PC electronics are.....”

Glancing around, I looked at the signs hanging from the ceiling that pointed to different sections of home appliances. However, perhaps because it was so carefully divided into subsections, I couldn’t find it very well.

“PC electronics, PC elect—.....!”

Probably because I’d gotten dizzy from turning around while looking upwards,

I ended up bumping straight into a salesperson. I was bumping into people way too often today; this was really not good.

“Excuse me.....! Ah, uh, um..... Could you please tell me which way to the PC electronics department?”

Removing the earphones from one ear, I tried talking. With reason being that she was a salesperson, I ended up talking in an apologetic manner. When I properly looked at her face, I saw that she was quite the beautiful person. She definitely had a boyfriend. Her scent drifted in my direction.

For a brief moment, the sales lady hesitated with an, “Umm...” before politely answering, “Ah, ahh! PC electronics? If that’s what you’re looking for, just go straight down from this aisle, it’ll be on your right once you reach the far end.”

“Um..... Th—thank you very much.....”

Although I had been nervous about trying to hold a decent conversation with another person for the first time in a while, I felt a sense of relief knowing it had gone well, and my chest overflowed with the satisfaction of talking with a pretty girl. Yes, this was a good store. With both my mood and walking pace lightened, I triumphantly continued down the aisle that the sales lady had told me about.

“Ah~ Master?”

“Hm? What’s up?”

I replied in a way so cheerful that even I found it strange. Could a person change this much just by speaking to a girl? Life was a wondrous thing.

“Well... this.....”

As soon as she said so, something like the bustling noise of environmental sounds abruptly came in through my earphones.

“Hm? What is th—....”

Just as I was about to ask what it was, I suddenly heard an eerie male voice mumbling, “Aah.... Excuse meeee.... Uhm.... Could you please, uh... t-tell me which way to the PC electronics d-department...?”

The next moment, I heard a clear female voice start speaking, “Umm...” in a

very-obviously embarrassed manner.

And with that, the sound cut off.

“That’s how you sounded, Master. Would you like to listen to it again?”

It was apparent that this was the result of continuing to only converse with mysterious software for the past two years.

Along with the sensation of something like cold stones sitting in my stomach, I felt the urge to scream at the top of my lungs.

“Well, I’m already used to how you talk, but for ordinary people, I think it might be more of a challenge.”

“Let’s... just go home already.....”

“We can’t!! We haven’t even gone to the amusement part yet!!”

“It’s enough already... I already feel like I’ve ridden a thrill ride...”

It felt like tears would start falling if I had my head down, so I walked with my head held up. I would never come back to this store again.

“Isn’t it fine~? If you want to talk to someone, I’ll be glad to listen anytime!”

“Then when we get back, I’ll consult you about my life.... I want to die....”

“Hehehe~ Please leave it to me! So rest assured, Master! Ah, look look! We’re almost at the PC electronics corner!!”

By the time I’d noticed, on the right side of the aisle, there were headsets meant for chatting online, and web cameras being displayed. It was probably a corner made to promote video streaming that was popular lately. How idiotic. If only humanity would no longer have a need for even a voice...

From there, I turned right into the next aisle, to see the latest ultra-thin laptop, and high-spec PC made for online games—all of this brilliantly shining machinery that I would usually be delighted over.

However, right now, I only wanted to get the mouse and keyboard as soon as possible, ride that thing that went up and down, ride the roller coaster, too, and go home as quickly as I could.

“Let’s hurry up and buy them and go home....”

“Master!?”

“I know, I know.... Ughh....”

As I tottered along to the space where the mice and keyboards were displayed, there were promotional signs adorned everywhere with things like, “With a simple method, you can use the internet!” “Connect your PC with your mobile phone and chat via a webcam!” However, to be honest, my eyes were already tired.

Escaping from that glamorous aisle, I arrived at the section that had the mice and keyboards that I sought.

With both wireless and trackball types, here as well, there were a wide variety of the latest models.

“There seems to be a lot of different kinds, huh. Honestly, any is fine with me, but I’d prefer one that doesn’t break easily....”

——It was sudden.

It was really sudden. Even though I was wearing earphones, the explosive sound that rang out throughout the floor was loud enough to hear.

It was dry and unrealistic, but I recognized what it was.

At the same time, I could hear the sound of people yelling.

In a moment, my heart was throbbing violently.

As soon as I removed one side of my earphones, the reality dramatically increased; screams and sounds of people chattering dominated the floor.

“Just what——?!”

With little communication, I didn’t understand the situation. The moment I warily exited into the large walkway, the sound of something made of iron collapsing resounded on the floor.

I looked towards the elevator hall, and the passage I’d just come through was

blocked by a white, iron wall.

It was a shutter that had appeared to cut off access to the elevators. It wasn't like display shelves, but a completely solid wall with no gaps.

When I looked at the very back of the divided pathway, right in front of the shutters, I came to understand to the origin of the explosion. At first I didn't think it to be possible, but as soon as I realized it to be the truth, the color drained from my face at an impossible speed.

The first explosion and the cause of the scream had probably been "that".

The saleslady who had helped me earlier was lying there.

From those healthy-looking thighs to the white floors, red pools of blood gradually spread. On a face distorted in pain, not even a fragment of that dazzling smile from before remained.

There, stood a heavily-built man. He had an unshaven beard, and wore a sneaking suit like someone from a movie about the special military force.

In his hand was a gun, and dangling at his waist was a real hand grenade, that released an entirely differently sense of presence than the pot from earlier. However, he paid it absolutely no attention, and stood with an unruffled stance. Surrounding him were several men dressed in a similar manner. The man with the unshaven beard gave off the sense of being in the center, and all of them pointed guns in the direction of the shoppers in each aisle. Screams of shoppers echoed from the smaller aisles that I wasn't able to see, along with the overbearingly authoritative instructions to subdue them. The salespeople seemed to have just as little means of resisting as the shoppers did. Most likely, the men that were present here had more accomplices elsewhere.

The first person to hear the sound of the explosion and gun.

Or perhaps, they were the person that saw it directly.

At any rate, including all those that tried to escape, everyone was gathered into one place at an alarming speed.

This floor had been completely taken over by this group of people at an astonishing rate.

“...Well, is this everyone?”

“Yeah. Including all the shoppers, this is all the people on this side of the floor.”

“Good. Ah~.... Even though you were all in the middle of enjoying shopping on a holiday, it really is a shame. How unfortunate for all of you.”

The bearded man said this with imprudent wording, spitting at us who were underfoot.

Several dozens of people were gathered in the space designated for the television corner, at the very back of the home appliances department on the seventh floor. Everyone had their hands restrained behind their backs with something like strong duct tape, and were all seated on the floor.

The glass window that had previously let in sunlight, was now covered by a white shutter that would normally only be put in place after business hours. The faint sound of sirens from the patrol cars could just barely be heard from outside, and on the other side of the shutters that divided the floor, there were the voices of what seemed to be negotiations from the police.

In front of us stood nine men that looked like the very embodiment of the term “terrorists”. Three of them were pointing guns at us, three were by the shutters, and two, that seemed to be leaders, were huddled together with the bearded man from earlier and engaged in conversation.

“13:00 hours. It’s time.”

“Gotcha.”

With the cue from his comrade, who had been glancing at his watch while speaking to him, the bearded man pulled out a cell phone. He began talking into it casually, almost as if he were simply ordering a pizza delivery.

At that moment, the voice did not come from the mouth of the man standing before us, but at a high volume from the speakers that were meant for broadcasting announcements throughout the building.

“Ah~ testing, testing. Oh, can you hear me? To all you police, it’s been hard on you. I’m only gonna say this once, so listen carefully.”

As soon as his voice sounded, the voices shouting negotiations from the other side of the shutter stopped.

When the man paused to take a breath, only the faint sounds of the sirens were audible.

“As you can already see, we have taken over this floor. The several dozens of hostages are, well, safe. For now. Frankly, we have only one demand. Within thirty minutes, I want you to prepare one billion yen.”

Without caring about the reaction of those around him, and almost as if saying something extremely obvious, the man continued in an indifferent tone, “In half an hours’ time, bring the money to the top floor of this building. We have someone on standby to receive the money, which you will toss down from a helicopter. Things like counterfeit money or transmitters are useless, so you’re better off not trying. Also, well, although I’m sure it’s already clear, in the case that you are unable to prepare the money or you prioritize rescuing the hostages first, I will kill every single person here.”

The people being held hostage began to react with increasing volume, but were quickly silenced once held at gunpoint again by three of the men. The sobbing voices were reduced to a quiet whimpering.

“.....And well, that’s about it. You’d better act accordingly. If you break even one of the conditions I’ve said here..... Ah~ well, I’m certain you understand. Well then, take care.”

From an outsider’s point of view, the man sounded as if he were merely talking to a friend. Sighing as he’s just dealt with a troublesome triviality, he sat down on a nearby bench.

Honestly, what were the chances that I’d become a terrorist’s hostage?

I had to be the only one to suddenly experience something like this after going out for the first time in two years.

I was thoroughly shocked at my misfortune. Would you just call this my unlucky day?

“Ah~ It’s so boring just waiting around. Should I have made it fifteen minutes instead?”

The man had his legs crossed and was messing with his cell phone in such a relaxed, careless manner, you wouldn’t think that he was a criminal culprit that had just committed a serious crime.

The man standing beside him, that seemed to be something like a close associate, was calming him in an inoffensive manner, saying “Just be a little more patient....”

These men that were behaving as if they’ve already completed a perfect crime. ... What did they plan to do after this? Have a getaway helicopter pick them up? But even if they did so, it was obvious that they would be tracked and caught in one fell swoop. They had another accomplice to receive the money, and there had to at least be one more to control the shutters and operate the broadcasting system. What kind of “safety guaranteed” state-of-art technology was this? It’d failed completely! Quite the opposite of the purpose it’d been made for, this kind of system had been to their advantage. Having all the security systems managed completely by computer meant that if you could take control of the computers, you could manipulate this entire building in the palm of your hand.

Although I wasn’t sure of the means, if they seemed this calm, they probably had a certain way of escape. Because they’d been able to carry out this incomplete, yet strangely complete, situation in such a short period of time, it wasn’t likely that they’d left out an escape route in their plans.

—However, it didn’t seem like they had any intention to wait in silence.

Rescuing of the hostages? These people in front of me didn’t seem like they gave even a hair’s width of care for innocent lives. Our lives were being held at stake here. Something this insecure, it wouldn’t be a surprise if it fell apart at any

time.

If only.

If only there was some opening, I could turn this situation around.

“—Tch!”

All of a sudden, the bearded man held the back of his head, and stood up while screwing up his face in anger.

“.....Oi.....!”

“Huh.....? Guh!”

The man that had stood up drew close to his accomplice and punched him in the stomach with all his strength.

“What do you mean, ‘huh?’ Bastard, whose head are you hitting, oi! Well!? Say something!”

He started to kick his comrade who was collapsed onto the floor in agony.

In this incomprehensible situation, the place quickly became an uproar.

Even the men that were pointing guns in our direction, as expected, were in a state of being unable to hide their agitation.

“Why, all of a sudden....?”

“Kukuku....”

In the midst of the mens’ angry voices resounding on the floor, I heard the sudden, quiet snickering of the boy sitting behind and to the left of me.

“Eh....?”

Shocked by hearing this sudden and out-of-place laughter, I looked towards the boy.

“.....? Ah, no, sorry sorry, it was just too funny, heh.”

Age-wise, he appeared to be a bit younger than I was. A youth with large, cat-like eyes, short, wispy brown hair, and wearing a thin, grey parka.

“Funny? What is.....?”

“Eh? Well, a lot of things. Anyway, you—You’ve been making rather interesting ‘eyes’ since earlier. Kind of like.... ‘I have to do something~ But there’s no chance for me to~’”

Even now, the shouting continued. Including the terrorists and the hostages, the tensions of everyone in this place were at its peak, and yet only this boy carried a loose atmosphere around him, almost as if he were a bystander.

“How do you.....?”

Speaking in small voices, it probably couldn’t be heard over the din of the shouting. The cat-eyed boy continued.

“Well, just somehow or other. But what is it, in reality?Do you have some kind of plan?”

“.....If my hands can be freed for just thirty seconds, I can render these guys speechless.”

“Ohh, that’s amazing. Well, you don’t seem like you’re lying. What’s the probability of success?”

“.....Sorry to say, but..... 100 percent.”

Hearing that, he began snickering again.

“It’s fine if you don’t believe me. Well, it’s not like I’ll be able to free my hands.”

“No, sorry, sorry! It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just that you really seem sure of yourself. I see, I see.”

Even after saying this, his expression still appeared as if he found the whole thing unbearably amusing rather than truly trusting me. Ignoring the fact that he had to be out of his mind to be laughing in this kind of situation, I felt a strange sense of relief from his words.

“Umm, I’m just guessing, but I think these guys will make another

announcement again in a little while. When that time comes, an opportunity will surely be made, and then it'll be up to you. Do your best."

"What? And what's that supposed to mean? I already said that I can't break free of these, first of all....."

"Ahh~ This pisses me off. Oi, I'm going to announce it one more time. Connect me to the broadcast."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Ignoring the fact that he'd beat his comrade (who continued to sporadically deny, "I didn't do it!") black and blue, the bearded man, evidently still angry, judging from the vein popped on his forehead, shouted the order to another one of his accomplices.

Even though ten minutes hadn't yet passed since the last broadcast, it seemed the second broadcast would begin soon.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, beside me, the boy that had predicted this situation seemed to be having fun watching this scene unfold before us.

Certainly, everything had happened just as he'd said. However, would an opportunity really open up in a situation like this? But, even if one did, it'd be useless if I couldn't free my hands.

Hearing something from his accomplice, the man took out his phone again and began the broadcast for the second time.

"Ah~.... Can you hear me? I've decided to decrease the time to prepare the money by ten minutes. That means there's only ten minutes left. If you wanna complain about not having enough time, I'll kill half the people here right now. Understand?"

Once again, the hostages started murmuring again, and small screams rose up. Even the terrorists that had immediately silenced the commotion earlier showed confusion, as this change of events seemed to be different than what they had planned.

"And I'll say this now... We're leaving by helicopter after we get the money.

You'd better not follow us. The helicopter's filled with explosives. If we release them, they'll probably eradicate the streets. If I sense any trace of someone following us, I'll immediately release those bombs."

We could hear the police stirring from the other side of the shutters. Of course they would; after all, all the people on the streets had just been taken as hostages, as well.

Their plan was meticulous, not to mention the size of their organization played a large part in it. They were willing to take the residents of this city as their hostages just so they could ensure their own escape. With how completely restrained they were by the force of the threats, not to mention the short amount of time they had left, it didn't seem likely that the police would be able to handle this situation.

"What the hell are they thinking.....?"

If the bombs were released from here, then my house would be within their range. If, by any chance, my mom and younger sister were at home right now, there was so much of a chance that they would get caught up in the explosion.

"Damn it.... That's going too far....."

I was starting to lose control over my rising anger.

However, as if he had anticipated this, the cat-eyed boy spoke to me,

"It's alright. There's still time, so it'll be fine."

I could no longer stand his carefree attitude.

"....This isn't the time to be fooling around! My family could die here!!"

Before I could stop myself, I ended up yelling. My voice caused the whole floor to become deadly silent, and of course, even the men with the guns looked shocked.

The cat-eyed made a face that seemed to say, “Oh my.....”, but didn’t seem terribly surprised.

Looking at me with a piercing look, the bearded man walked over.

He stopped right in front of me, crouched down, and brought his face close to mine.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you, boy? So noisy....”

The moment I heard his voice up-close, the realizations of his acts of violence hit me one after another.

My body was hit with a feeling of fear all at once, and began trembling.

“Oi, oi, you’re trembling. What happened to that show of confidence just now!?”

Grinning, he held me up by the hair.

“What a weakling... You don’t get out much, do you!? I’m sure no one would care if trash like you died, right? Isn’t that right? Oi!”

Cackling, he directed his comment to his other companions.

Their loud voice really hurt my ears.

—That’s why I was glad I only had to listen to them directly through “one ear”.

“...ife....”

“Ah? What’d you say? It was so quiet I couldn’t even hear you!”

I looked him in the eye and said it clearly.

“Bastards like you should just rot in jail for the rest of your life!”

“Just as I thought... you really are interesting! Excellent.”

The moment after I heard this, the huge TV that was leaning against the wall behind the man came crashing to the floor. Because it was so sudden, everyone turned their attention in that direction.

Immediately after, the huge speakers that were lined up below the TV began to fall, one by one, despite not being touched at all.

“Hey! What’s going on!?”

The bearded man dropped me onto the floor, and walked over there while pointing his gun.

“Who’s there——!?”

This time, before he could finish speaking, the display shelf close to him fell over, sending several of the products tumbling down on him.

“Uoooo!?”

Right behind where the shelf had fallen, as if to trap the bearded man, I saw the PC electronics aisle that I had been in earlier.

Although I didn’t understand what was going right now, this had to be that “opportunity.”

The next moment, the binds on my hands came off.

“There you go. I’m looking forward to your performance~”

When I looked beside me, the cat-eyed boy was grinning while shaking his hands, which should have been tied up.

My heart was pounding loudly.

Much louder, and stronger than even when the siren had played this morning.

I pushed myself off the floor in one swift movement.

The gun-wielding men were still panicking, unable to fully understand the situation.

Even I didn't fully know what I was doing.

——But I knew that it was something that I had to do.

I jumped off of the display shelf that was trapping the bearded man, trapping him even further, and ran towards the PC electronics aisle.

Naturally, the other men reacted to this, and pointed their guns in my direction.

I heard the hostages scream, and shout, "Watch out!"

However, it was already too late; the mission was about to succeed.

Before jumping forward, I pulled my phone out of my pocket, and called "her" for the first time in a while.

"I'm counting on you.... Ene!"

"You'd better take me to the amusement park after this!"

image

I heard the familiar, cheerful voice of a girl through my right earphone.

Taking the cable used for connecting phones to the PC for the camera function, I unplugged it and connected it to my own phone. When I did, I saw a familiar figure run across all of the display screens.

And at the same time, an impact I had never felt before, hit me in the ribs.

It felt like my body had been struck by a hammer.

After that, I was completely blinded.

Unable to regain composure, I collapsed, and crumpled onto the white floor.

I felt all of my strength rapidly drain from my whole body.

As I was quickly losing consciousness, I could hear the sound of the shutters opening.

The warmth of the sunlight enveloped my body.

It felt like when I used to take a nap in the classroom, in my seat by the window, and “that voice” would speak to me.

.....How long had I been sleeping? When I opened my eyes, I was lying in a bed in a room full of books. I looked beside the bed and saw a water basin and a towel. Has someone been taking care of me?

Still in a daze, I felt my breast pocket, but I couldn't find my phone.

Even when I fumbled around the bedside, it wasn't there either.

——That time, when I'd become a hostage....

Through the right earphone that I'd still had on, Ene had been speaking to me insistently.

Truthfully, she'd been much more annoying than that bearded man.

When we had first been captured, she kept giving me strange encouragements like, “Uwawa.... Rest assured, Master! I'm sure help is on the way!” And then when I'd been threatened by the bearded man, I'd seen her personality take a complete 180 degrees turn as she snapped, “Can I kill this guy!? Can I!? Master!!”

In the first place, since the building itself was run by computers, even if the control room had been taken over by some high-level hacker, it was obvious that they stood no chance as long as I sent Ene in.

Even so, in that situation where the phone's camera was unusable and communication between us was impossible, I was pretty surprised that she'd been able to figure out what was going on her own, and resolve everything in that small window of opportunity we had. I'd been convinced that she was completely insane, but she could be surprisingly level-headed.

Well, in any case, I felt like it was also thanks to Ene that I was alive right now....

I didn't really want to, but I'd have to thank her properly..... I hadn't been able to take her to the amusement park in the end either, after all....

But since I couldn't find my phone right now, did that mean it'd been left there in the department store....? Well, if it was her, she'd probably be able to come back somehow anyway....

More importantly, since I had all this time to myself now, I should be making the most of it.

Today, I'd sleep to my heart's content—

“.....Actually, where is this, anyway!?”

I bolted up from my bed and looked around at my surroundings.

“Eeek!”

Hearing a thud, I looked over and saw a girl, with long, fluffy, white hair. Had she been the one looking after me this whole time? My sudden loud voice had scared her into falling out of her chair.

“U-uh... umm....”

“Ah, wahh! I'm sorry!”

For some reason, she apologized, and then hid behind the chair.

Once I'd calmed down and grasped the situation, I realized that I barely felt any pain in my body.

If I remembered right, I was sure I'd had been hit by a bullet....

“Umm.... You're—”

“Master~! Are you awake yet!?”

The moment I started to speak to the girl, I heard a familiar voice. However, when the door to the room opened, the ones that came in were people I never would have expected.

The cat-eyed boy, and the one I bumped into near the entrance at the department store—I'd thought it was a guy at the time, but after looking properly, it seemed she was actually a girl. And.... And my sister, Momo, was also standing there, holding my phone out in front of her.

“Ohh! Master, it's great that you have so much energy! Now then, let's all go to the amusement park together~!”

Ene said to me in a cheerful voice from the phone's speakers.

“Eh? Momo? Wait, huh? That time..... huh?”

“Stupid big brother! Why'd you have to take it that far?! And Ene, about going to the amusement park today to make up for yesterday, as expected, it probably wouldn't be such a good idea right now....”

When had they gotten so close? My sister, Momo, was talking casually to Ene.

“Ah, eh...? No, I'm fine with going to the amusement park, but more importantly, I—”

“R-i-g-h-t?! As expected of Master Tough Guy! A man should never go back on his word! Let's go! As soon as possible!”

“Eh? What's that? Are we talking about going to the amusement park now? Let's go, let's go!”

“D-do we have to go out again?”

The cat-eyed boy leaned over, and the white-haired girl's shoulders shivered as she remained sitting on the floor.

“Ah.... Sorry it got so noisy all of a sudden. Luckily, it seemed the bullet only grazed you, so we brought you back here for the time-being. It would have been troublesome if too much of a commotion stirred up.”

“Eh? Uhh....”

The hooded girl's “eyes” looked different from the time I'd bumped into her.

“Master! Since you’re awake now, let’s hurry! If we don’t, it’s going to close!”

I was too confused to try and make sense of the multiple conversations going on around me, and soon gave up on it altogether. I stopped trying to think.

“....Oh, whatever.”

So I wasn’t going to get any rest, after all, then. It wasn’t fair.

At the very least, I wanted to sleep for just a while longer, but with how noisy Ene had gotten, it didn’t seem likely that she’d even allow me that much.

But for some strange reason, I wound up smiling a little.

——As usual, I could hear the terribly noisy cries of the cicadas from outside of the window.

And from here on, our long, long August 15th.... began.

——-

translation notes:

- In Japan, 119 is their equivalent of 911.

Kagerou Daze 2

I had a really bad dream. I dreamt of you dying in front of me.

I've already dreamt of it countless of countless times.

All of it, all of them were yesterday's dreams.

How many times has it been today?

How many times had it been yesterday?

This moment where I talk to you in the park, how many times have I seen this?

Maybe for you it's the first time, but I have no idea how many times I have been through this.

I've said it countless times.

And you believe me every time.

It's rather frustrating.

But every single time, it ends with you dying.

When I mention this you get frustrated, and a sad expression appears on your face.

So, I choose to stop mentioning it.

Not like it matters. It became pointless a while ago.

Now, I'm beginning to enjoy chatting with you in this park. Just listening to your voice is fine.

Because you've said the exact same words countless times, I can pretty much remember everything you've said flawlessly.

But that's fine too.

It's fine like this, because I want to hear you talking.

Because when I hear your voice, I can't hear the noisy calls of the cicadas.

Because I can only hear your voice.

Looking at my watch, it's already 12:30 in the afternoon.

"We should be going back now, right?"

I stretch out my hand, and you take hold of it while blushing violently.

Even at the very end, you're still such a disgusting person...

That's exactly why you're not popular.

So, it's almost time now.

Thank you for all you've done so far, Hibiya.

For me, it doesn't matter whether it's the noisy cries of the cicadas,

Or the shaking heat haze,

... I really do hate summer.

- As I looked up, an iron pole fell from the sky at exactly the right time.

Chapter 2: Kisaragi Attention

“Ara, good morning, Momo-chan! Looking cute as usual!”

“Morning... haha...”

Gently nodding my head, I hurriedly walked past. That was the thirty-seventh time today, I sighed to myself.

Taking a huge detour from the direct route that would unquestionably save me extra time to get to school, I walked through the shopping districts that were, for the most part, empty in the early morning and because none of the stores had opened yet, there was absolutely no customers – at least, that was what it was supposed to be like. But now it was already slowly filling up with bustling activity.

The stores in the direction I was walking towards already had people in them and as I walked closer, more people came out as though they had calculated this timing, and began planting seeds of conversation with me.

“Oh Momo-chan! Are you going to school after this? It must be hard on you considering it’s still summer vacation!”

“Uh, um... hello... haha...”

The thirty-eighth.

Clumsily waving hello at the owner of the vegetable and fruits stall, I faced the streets again, and it had noticeably filled up with crowds of people.

“...!”

I cowered slightly, and having no time to consider my options. I turned right after the pharmacy with the opened blinds that was next to the stall, then ran down the alley.

I jogged briefly while checking the time on my watch.

Despite all that, today was still a rather lucky day.

I might even get the chance to step through the school gates with time to spare.

I increased my pace naturally, and as I was turning left at the T-junction – I realized how naïve I was.

The bus station before me, probably because the previous bus was delayed or something, had a queue that could, in the best case scenario, only be cleared up in two buses.

A boy at the back noticed me and let out a cry of some sort, and immediately everyone's "glances" were on me.

- This is bad. This is really bad. I thought to myself.

As I shrank away from the cheers emanating from the crowd, my face turned a shade of green as I noticed the time displaying on the clock on top of the bus station.

Did my watch run out of battery? I thought, the display on it wasn't advancing at all.

"Ehhhhhh..." the cry I uttered, was quickly drowned out by the calling of the cicadas.

"Ahhhhh....! It happened again..."

The school gates were completely closed, without even enough space for one person to slip through.

Well, but since the existence of the gate would be completely unnecessary if there were space for someone to slip through, in this department the school gates had done their job exceptionally well.

It was 9:10 a.m. on the 14th of August.

Don't even mention reaching just in time, I was already late enough to casually skip the first period of summer school.

Even if I had found a way to avoid the alarm sounded by the passengers at the bus stop, at that point in time I would've definitely been late already.

Taking a gamble to go along the main road which was the shortest route was out of the question.

The streets were playing my new love song that couldn't even be described with the words "beyond popular" at an immense volume, and posters advertising my new single were pasted virtually everywhere.

Even worse, a PV of myself dancing while wearing a dress that could be described as "with way too many frills" was being played on a large screen, and the CD store directly below the screen was selling the CD that had been put out today, with a long queue of people who wanted the limited edition goods (a poster) already crowding outside it.

"I wonder what the situation would have been like if I hadn't passed by that way..."

My agent's car was parked outside the school gates, and the air conditioning made it feel like heaven inside. The short-haired woman collapsed against on the shotgun seat's door was muttering tiredly as though she had just came back from a long day at work, despite it only being early in the morning.

"So-sorry... but really! Today there was a little um... the bus was late so the students..."

As if she found all my actions rather annoying, the agent let out a sigh "Ha....", then interrupted what I was about to say.

"Well I can't say I understand how you're feeling... something about being picked up after school in a private car would be too obvious so you hate it right?"

"Um... yes..."

"Even though I've been trying my best to respect your views, but almost indeed, yes... Actually I've been meaning to discuss this with you recently..." (TL note: This sentence isn't poorly translated but instead it means to show how annoyed/bored the woman is with this whole affair) With apologetic words being directed towards me, I somehow felt slightly apologetic as well.

Remaining silent for a short period of time, then suddenly remembering to check the time, it was just about time for recess after the first period.

“...Ah! I need to go...! Um, I will contact you! Sorry!”

If I didn't enter the school by then, I would miss yet another period.

Hurriedly getting down from the shotgun seat, again bowing in the direction of the car, and once again observing the expression of helplessness upon my agent's face.

Yet again bowing in the direction of the car that had extinguished its warning signals and was slowly driving off, then moving along the walls bordering the schoolyard and the dormitories while thinking of entering the school through the teachers-only entrance. Since I was in an air-conditioned car for the most part of the journey, I could more evidently feel droplets of sweat beading upon my brow due to the temperature. But, the commotion earlier had already made me sweat enough to make my uniform stick to my back, so I guess it isn't that big of a problem. Despite wearing the nametag of a 16-year-old high school student, running in this kind of heat would still make one sweat.

This is the worst. I want to run home right now and take a shower.

As I reached somewhere around the middle of the wall the bell began to ring again.

Oh no. After the ten-minute break ends, the second period of supplementary classes would start.

Jogging to the teachers-only entrance, then pressing the button to activate the intercom, I had barely needed to wait a few seconds before a disembodied voice replied.

The chaotic noises unique to a schoolyard, were sufficiently projected through the tiny intercom to give me the sense that I was in a different world entirely. As I imagined stepping into this realm, my mood became even worse.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Ah, yes! Um, I'm a first-year student, Kisaragi... I would like to request permission to enter the school since I'm late for supplementary classes...”

How many times had I already heard the voice of the female secretary?

Since school reopened until four months into the first semester, I think she's

the person I've talked to the most throughout this period. And among those conversations over ninety percent of them were carried out through this intercom, it really makes me feel frustrated.

"Ah, it's Kisaragi. I'll unlock the door, so please proceed to the staff room."

It had reached a point where an excuse was no longer needed, not even angry nor suspicious at why I was always being late, but I suppose this was my only salvation.

"Excuse me... please..."

Hearing the clack as the bolts slid open, I pushed open the door leading into the school compounds.

As the door closed, it once again made a clacking noise to signify that the bolts had slid shut once more.

The school compounds had a cooling sensation that wasn't present outside. Even though it was summer vacation, the school was still open for those students that had to come back for either club activities or supplementary classes. - During spring this very year, I began studying in this school.

A four-story school building that was just built last year had a Western-ish design, and became a useless construction nonetheless nice to look at. Like a girls-only schoolyard that would appear in shoujo manga... well maybe not to that extent, but the clock tower decorated with unprovoked garlands of flowers, (TL note: Yes, there is supposed to be a comma here leading into the next paragraph, don't ask. Probably for ease of reading.) Not to mention small decorative hills, fountains and fully nude statues could be found all around the school compound, and even a tunnel made completely of fauna that I still can't completely comprehend intentionally built at the entrance.

Whose idea was this, even if someone were to build a school like this right in the center of city streets lined with concrete jungles, it would just look out-of-place right, well that was what I thought, but it still was stunningly popular among the female demographic, seemingly having the highest female student percentage within the district.

Even though I had applied into this school with the rather un-childish excuse of

it being “close to home”, but considering someone like me who’s academics are poor could successfully gain entry, to be honest it could only be attributed to luck.

Due to my attendance record being a despairingly low number, I had to take supplementary lessons over the summer holidays. Despite this, I think even if I had attended every lesson I would still have to come for the sake of my results. That was the only thing I could confidently declare.

And there was no time left.

Aiming for the teachers-only entrance, I hopped up the stairs in a three-by-three step fashion. Just as I opened the glass doors, I once again was able to enjoy the sensation of the cooling air generated by the air conditioning. As I entered this space, I realized that I really was sweating a lot.

I removed my indoor slippers from my bag, and hurriedly changed my slippers.

“Ah! The time is...! ...Ouch!?”

As I was folding up the bag used to hold my indoor slippers, and taking out the bag used for my outdoor shoes something hard crashed unto my head.

I raised my head in surprise, and saw a tall and large man holding an attendance record and wearing a white coat standing behind me.

“Ah... um, haha... good morning?”

“Wrong, even if you greet me... and it isn’t even that early anymore...”

“Ye-yes...”

I’m finished. I completely forgot that today’s first period was conducted by our form teacher.

If it was any other teacher it would’ve been fine, but it was impossible to smoke past this guy.

“You didn’t even bother informing me even when you’re already this late. Take a look at this for me for a moment.”

“Eh? What... eh!?”

As I received the paper he took out from the attendance register and read

what was on it, my face turned a shade of green against my will.

“Do you understand what you’re looking at? Is there any problem?”

“Um it was the Biology Test I.... held last week...”

“Oh, at least you understood that. Now what about the number written beside it?”

“Eh... heh... I don’t really understand this part... ouch!?”

Hit by the attendance record again. This man would expressionlessly do this sort of thing without warning so I can’t let my guard down. Unavoidable.

“Let me tell you something... let’s just skip the fact that your handwriting is barely legible, but then what about you still scoring only two marks after two weeks of supplementary classes? Do you need a hundred weeks of classes before you get full marks?”

The results of the test were unspeakably bad.

Even though there were no questions left blank, and all the answers were filled in with some thought and effort, but aside from a single question, all the others had a large question mark written beside them in red ink.

I felt dizzy staring at this unsightly scenario.

“But... but I put in effort...”

“Eh!? What!? This is putting in effort!? You answering the question “Please provide an example of a mammal” with “A. Crab, Salmon” is called “putting in effort”!?”

“Be-because my mum’s hometown is at Hokkaido... Wait! I had also considered it might be “Deer, Bear”...”

“Hokkaido!! Those fellows over there!! ...So why are you choosing to show your love for your hometown in this situation!? And it clearly says here to provide one example and not a pair!”

“Eh!? Because wouldn’t it be pitiful if there were only one!”

“Why would you come up with this sort of weird ideas while sitting for a test? And in a deer and bear combination the deer would probably be eaten anyway!”

“E-eaten!?”

Controlling the urge to let loose a tirade of comments, I looked at the test paper once more.

But, I couldn't understand why myself. I had put in that much effort as well, these results were really too brutal to look at. What would Mum say if she saw this...? I couldn't even bear imagining it.

- It was always like this.

Whatever I did would always achieve the opposite effect, and attract the “Attention” of others.

When I was in primary school, a picture I drew was coincidentally selected by a famous author, and was used as the cover of a novel, which became a best-seller.

In junior high I received an invitation from the art club, where my very first submission for an art competition in my first year left the chairman's submission in the dust, and it then achieved best in the country. At that time, I began to notice that the eyes of everyone around me began to focus on my “physical self”.

In my second year in junior high, I stopped attending club activities that were becoming increasingly uncomfortable for me, and when loitering around and shopping after school, I noticed that I was gaining a lot of attention from idol hunters. Even though I initially refused, but when faced with the current situation of my mom's job becoming increasingly unsuccessful due to various reasons, I decided to attempt to earn some money for the family and took up the offer.

As for my motivation or whatever behind this, it wasn't because I particularly enjoyed television, nor because I liked music. Even though I felt this way, I guess I always wanted to sing on stage as an idol, I suppose.

My first job as an idol, was to “warm up” the audience for a senpai back then, the main performer. I wasn't and still am not very good at public speaking, but all I was thinking of when I accepted the job was “I can't get myself fired now”, and nothing else.

During the actual performances I was way too nervous to remember what exactly I had said, but despite that you could say they were very successful, achieving the “best” potential results.

The stadiums were packed with unprecedented amounts of people, and all sorts of magazines and sports journals published articles upon articles regarding my performances. The only problem was, the main topic of discussion should have been my senpai, the main performer, but instead I was once again the centre of attention.

The “nameless idol” that didn’t dance nor sing, but only appeared on stage to talk garnered a huge amount of support from the audience. Even though it was a good thing for the agency, but I had literally no time to catch my breath from that day onwards, with endless phone calls flowing in regarding my status, which was definitely an oddity.

All I could do was constantly attract the “Attention” of others, defying all forms of common sense and logic, attracting people meaninglessly and completely regardless of personal preference or reason.

At that time, I again realized I wasn’t “normal”.

“Oi-. I was wondering whether you were listening.”

“...Eh!? Um, yes!”

“No, you clearly weren’t listening. Is it heatstroke?”

“Ah, no, it’s just that my results were too poor... haha...”

“Too poor. Anyway there will be a retest next week... just do your best.”

He looked at me with an expression of sympathy that one might use to look at a crying child.

“Next week!? Fine... I will try my best...” Even though I had already put in my best this time round.

How should I work hard after this...

“Just don’t stress yourself too much. Also you’re still conditioning to this school I suppose, don’t you have a live performance next week?”

“Ah...! Yes... I do...”

My expression became cloudy rather obviously, but I resisted these feelings with all the force I could muster.

He sighed again this time with a “Hmm”, then looked at me again this time with a gentle but yet helpless expression.

“Meh, just don’t push yourself too hard... Anyway just head back for now. Don’t you have a television series to film today?”

“Yes... wait! I’ll go to class! There’s still time!”

“No, it says so on the supplementary class timetable. We’re heading into the Hungry Ghost festival period for now so the first years only have one period of lessons today. The next class is in three days. Look closely next time will you...”

“Eh, eh!? Oh, really...”

As I looked at the timetable again, there really was only one period of lessons today.

I never imagined the fact that I came for supplementary lessons without checking the timetable would be revealed in this fashion...

“Um, so... see you in three days!”

“Mm. Not being able to take a break even during the festive period must be hard on you. So I should be heading back now, so you be careful on the way home OK?”

“No problem! So I’ll be saying goodbye here for today!”

After that simple conversation, I stuffed the test paper as far into my bag as I could, took off my indoor slippers and put on the outdoor shoes that I had just taken off, then closed the teachers-only entrance behind me.

As I walked out, the call of the cicadas overwhelmed me at once.

Meeting the direct sunlight for the second time, that seemed to be emanating even deadlier heat waves than before.

As I realized that I would have to go back home the same way as I came, I couldn’t help but sigh.

“Oh no... um, just let me get a drink or something...”

There was a vending machine between the teachers-only entrance and the school track. Once I realized that I was thirsty, the sensation instantly became unbearable. I began silently trekking upon the multi-coloured pebble trails in the direction of it.

Close to the vending machine, there was a rather large open-air recreational space lined with branches commonly found in park areas and monkey bars. Near one of the white tables that were scattered all around, there were a group of prim-looking girls chit-chatting. Maybe they were here to practise for some sort of club competition or something.

The pebble trail transitioned into a dirt surface, and as I stepped on it, all the girls immediately looked in my direction.

“...!”

They appeared to cower slightly, but it didn't appear to be due to hostility or particular interest in me. Just as I was wondering whether they were laughing at me, they began whispering to each other while walking quickly out of the recreational area.

By the time I had come to my senses to try and smile at them in reply, all of them had already left. Due to embarrassment or something like that, I felt more sweat rolling down my back.

“Sigh...” I exhaled a breath of air, then resumed walking towards the vending machine.

Even though the multi-coloured labels were killing my interest in buying, the thought that it could dispel all the bad feelings bottled up inside me throughout the day left me with no other options.

Among the aluminium cans some of them had rather unique designs, and a black carbonated drink caught my eye.

I pulled out my favourite pig-shaped coin purse from one of the side pockets on my bag, zipped up the back and took out just enough change to pay from the drink.

Inserting my hand into the back of the pig, then slotting the coins into the vending machine.

Instantly after I inserted all the change all the buttons turned a bright red, shining one by one exactly like traffic signs. (TL note: Original translation reads GO SIGN instead.) I had already made my selection. Stretching out my finger like an actor in a foreign film I watched as a kid that was meeting an unknown alien species for the first time, after I pressed the button a “beep” noise sounded and the drink tumbled into the withdrawal box.

I did consider gulping down the drink immediately with one hand on my waist, but after all this Kisaragi here is only 16, so I think I’ll just patiently finish it on this bench here. Doing as the romans do, I went over to the bench while still carrying the carbonated drink labelled “punk”.

Sitting beside a table a fair distance away from the vending machine, I expectantly opened the drink can.

Up to this point I had been able to control my facial expressions, but at that moment I couldn’t help but feel uncontrollably emotional. With a quick-sounding “pssh”, a unique sweet-smelling odour assaulted my nostrils. If I had looked in the mirror, my expression at that moment would probably be unpublishable, what the people at the agency would call NG. I gulped the drink down my throat with an irresistible urge.

Ah... the person that invented this drink, probably really hated summer...

It couldn’t even be called a drink.

This was probably the only natural defence mankind had towards the “summer heat”.

I felt something warm spilling out from the corners of my eyes as my first impression of the drink ended.

Slamming the drink can on the table and letting out a satisfied “Phew” gave me an unbelievably refreshing sensation. But I guess I should be resisting that sort of urge.

If anyone was watching, it would probably seem like a normal young woman finishing her drink and then capping it again. Because of that, I felt a sense of

satisfaction not unlike those old men at public baths who had just finished a bottle of strawberry milk in one gulp, feeling the urge to yell “I can’t take this!”

Completely relaxed, taking a deep breath, for some unknown reason, the summer heat seemed to have let up slightly. What would I do after today? I somehow began considering this without even realizing it.

“At least there’s still some time left... hmm?”

Looking at my watch, the time displayed on it was still 8:15 am. I was shocked momentarily, then I remembered my watch had stopped this morning. This watch was given to me by my mom on my birthday last year, so I guess it was rather important to me. It’s just that its lifespan was way too short, and I didn’t remember mistreating it, so the battery must have ran out. After I get back I might as well let my stupid older brother take a look at it, Indignantly, I took out my touchscreen smartphone which was stored in a pink case. Despite the fact that I always carried it around, but I didn’t use it at all for anything other than work purposes.

If I had good friends that I could discuss favourite television shows and high school crushes with, then maybe I would be using that thing more. But speaking of television, I only watch period dramas, and don’t even mention crushes, I don’t even have friends...

Well I did know the reasons for that more or less, but I didn’t really feel it was all that inconvenient. Just that, whenever I pull out my phone I feel an empty sensation for some reason, so I guess I don’t really like the old thing after all.

“Nine thirty... shooting starts two o’-clock so I need to be home by one...”

Immediately after I clicked on the daily planner application, a torrent of activities and notifications filled the screen.

August 14’s events were the drama series filming at two, appearing on a live talk show at 6 then rehearsal for a live concert, all these appointments were written down in detail in the application.

Today at one the agent will pick me up from my house.

I was used to it, but I still felt bored with my recently over-packed daily schedule. Due to various factors that the stage I mentioned previously brought

about, getting into top form for the performance proved to be challenging, thus all sorts of jobs were waiting for me which messed up my daily life quite a bit. Next week's live performance was to commemorate my single released today, and judging from the stunning CD sales this would be a live performance unlike any other.

Not to say I didn't feel happy, but that song brought back some hateful memories.

The main reason was that I had caught a heavy flu on the day of the recording itself, then my agent became enraged and forced me to carry through. The song performed with a severely nasal voice was regarded as "ingeniously portraying the unfulfilled love troubles of teenage girls" or something like that and got approval from the producers, so just like that it was directly made into a CD.

Although at that time I didn't feel as if my brain wasn't functioning properly due to the flu, now every time when I hear my nasal voice playing on the streets my appetite decreases by a half. It's still the summer vacation so it's manageable, but when I start thinking about how I should carry myself around in school for the next semester, it puts me in a rather bad mood.

As my mood got worse and worse, the summer heat began to feel increasingly depressing.

Drops upon drops of sweat were still forming on my forehead.

"Anyway I should go home first..."

There's no point waiting here. Replacing my phone in my pocket, I stood up from my seat.

Following the mediocrely cooling sensation that I felt as I lifted my legs that were in close contact with the chair, I subconsciously looked to the horizon. From the rather large track located opposite from the school buildings, I could hear echoes of commands being shouted out, probably the clubs practising.

That would be called something like "youth" I suppose, something that had absolutely no connection with me which made me rather worried somehow.

Uttering the umpteenth sigh that I had made today, I realized that on the table that the group of girls were sitting at had a flyer advertising something on it.

Multi-coloured and circular words and messily placed character designs were displayed on it, it appeared to be some advertising flyer for some art-and-craft store newly opened next to the bus station.

There appeared to be some activity going on both yesterday and today, as the dates “13th and 14th” were very obviously displayed in the centre of the flyer.

I surveyed the surroundings around me, then picked up the flyer.

In that instant, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. “...!!”

To be honest I didn't really have interest in that sort of thing, it was just that in a corner of the flyer, as if merely there to fill in the empty spaces on it had a picture of what appeared to be a “Little red Salmon keychain” that was unbelievably cute.

It really took up too little space, and its appearance wasn't exactly all that appealing, but observing the keychain which had the legs of the salmon growing out of where they weren't supposed to, I realized it was a rather decent piece of work.

I swallowed down my saliva with a gulp, then surveyed my surroundings again.

Looking down at the flyer once more, despite it not being clear what it was referring to, the words “Limited time only!” were written on the side.

I exhaled briefly, then stuffed the flyer into my bag.

Placing my hand on my hips then finishing up my drink in one gulp, I then threw the empty can into a trash can, then quickly left the school -.

- Maybe because of running at full speed in this heat, my vision became blurry.

The alley I had fled into gave off the impression that it was built around various elements of residential buildings, which made it almost exactly like a maze. Despite that turning into the back alleys might have made the air slightly more cooling, I had no time to consider my options..

My breathing was becoming uneven.

Placing one hand on the wall to support myself as I bent over, my sweat dripped onto the floor with a “pitter-patter”, leaving a trail.

Setting my bag down on the floor, I sat – no, collapsed – onto the floor. “Hah... hah...”

My breathing intervals gradually spaced out.

My brain that had up to this point been unable to catch up with reality began functioning again, and as I remembered the conversation earlier, my tears began dripping on the floor instead.

Resting my back against the wall, I hugged myself in something like a yoga position.

I felt like sobbing, but, there would be even bigger problems if I let out a sound now.

Burying my head deeper into my bag, my tears began flowing as though a leaking dam, but at least it was better than before.

Why did the situation turn out like this.

This sort of physique, it would be great if I didn't have it.

I want to talk normally, go out and buy things normally, live normally.

I wanted to make this ridiculous me disappear.

I might as well remain unnoticed for my entire life, and just die alone -!

Rewinding to what had just happened. After I left the school, I changed into rather simple yet casual clothes in a public toilet.

But, as I was walking towards the bus stop, when I reached the main road, I once again had attracted the attention of tens of people.

I was clearly completely unlike what I looked like on the big screen display, but person after person continued walking closer to me while calling out my name.

This is bad. When I realized that it was too late.

Coincidentally that was the time when the streets began to get crowded, and I forgot to consider that.

Instantly crowds of people began to form, and I found myself in a catch-22 situation. (TL note: For all you people out there bad at English: catch-22 situation = a situation where you have no way out/no possible options to

consider) Everyone seemed to be holding phones in their hands, pointing their camera lenses towards me.

Suddenly the flow of the crowd became thicker, while I continued to blankly stare at the cameras facing at me from all 360 degrees.

Did I do something bad?

It was true that my lack of self-awareness was my own fault.

But, despite this I just wanted to be a bit like a normal girl.

That's all I ask for.

Various sound effects of shutters clicking and the commotion of the crowd mixed together to form a chaotic wall of sound of which the likes of I had never seen. Facing this overly chaotic situation, I suddenly felt like throwing up. As I was just about to fall/sit upon the spot, the piercing call of a police signal drowned out the commotion of the crowd.

The pavement wasn't exactly very narrow, but the crowds spilled out onto the main road itself, and apparently someone had lodged a police report about it. However, the crowd still refused to let up. Conversely, the police siren achieved the effect of an advertising call, attracting more people to the scene.

Of course the other reason why people were continuing to be attracted was me.

There, everyone's "eyes" were looking at me.

Cutting through the crowds, for some reason multiple police officers approached me.

Just as one of them was putting his hand on my shoulder while attempting to speak to me, I jumped into the only space opened within the crowds.

I felt like continuing forward, but what appeared to be an endless tunnel stretched out before me.

Being pushed around by the bustling crowds, the tunnel became increasingly narrow.

I flailed my hands around in the darkness, and it felt as if someone had taken

hold of it.

Instantly, my field of vision returned to normal, and the streets appeared to widen as well.

I think someone saved me. But I didn't have the time to confirm it.

I immediately began running away, while looking behind my shoulder I saw the entire crowd advancing in my direction, as though the individuals within it were now one gigantic consciousness.

Despite that the amount of people significantly decreased as I turned into an alley, some still followed me, holding their cameras in one hand. I headed deeper into the unfamiliar alleyways, turning left and right as and when I felt like it, aimlessly trudging forward.

At that point I was so immersed in getting away from the crowd that I couldn't differentiate up from down.

"Ah...!"

As I turned into a narrow pathway, I realized it was a dead end.

I stopped for a moment to think, which was when my phone suddenly began to ring.

Hurriedly looking down at the LED screen, it was a call from my agent.

I nervously picked up the phone, which was when my agent began to talk, almost yelling at me.

"Hey!? Where are you now!?"

"I-I don't know... that, that, I..."

"We were contacted by the police, do you know how chaotic the situation here at the agency is know!? Argh... something like this just has to happen at such a critical moment..."

"U-um, so-sorry..."

"Do you know what kind of person you are!? Hmm!? You're not "normal" you know, you should've known something like this would've happened, right!?"

"...?"

“Eh!? What did you say!? Repeat that clearly, will you...!” “Am, am I really not normal!? I, I even dressed up normally for this... everyone... everyone was looking at me as though I was some abnormal thing...! I, I’ve had enough! I won’t go back anymore...! Thank, thank you for taking care of me all this time!”

“Eh!? Eh, wait –”

I hung up before the agent could say anything else.

What exactly had I said in this state of erratic breathing, unable to even think properly.

I had at least realized that I had done something fairly serious, how much trouble had I gave others at this point – I could at least understand that. But despite this, the only possible solution to this situation was to call back and apologize, which was something I would of course never do.

The never-ending calls of the cicadas, the rumbling of cars driving in the distance, the gentle vibrations coming through tiny holes in the walls, as I felt these sensations, I wondered just how long I had been sitting there.

I didn’t sense anyone coming into the alley where I was sitting in, so I sat there motionlessly, letting time flow past.

I wondered whether my mother had already been informed of this.

She had always been supporting me, and she would be happier than anyone else whenever my new CDs were released.

But I had betrayed her trust.

In the end I was only thinking of myself, constantly dragging others down with me...

My emotions that were bottled up inside me were released one by one through my tears.

I felt like running away as far as possible, but I would probably attract the attention of everyone no matter where I went. I had realized the fact that I wasn’t “normal” a while ago...

Suddenly I felt extremely uneasy.

Unconsciously turning to the side, my heart rate increased drastically when I saw what was before me.

“A-aah...!”

My body that was unable to coordinate sufficiently with my sudden movement lost balance, and I felt butt-first on the floor.

At the exit of the dead-end alley, stood a person.

Despite it being in the middle of the summer the person still wore a long-sleeved coat with her head deeply concealed with the hood, with her long hair billowing out of it.

The surprising part was, the person was standing within my arm's reach.

Did she reach here by muffling her footsteps? If she did then the situation would be unquestionably much worse. I opened my mouth as if to talk, but I couldn't produce any sound.

In this situation where I couldn't stand up even if I wanted to, I guess it would be known as the so-called “dead end”.

“Ah, no... sorry. I didn't mean to scare you...”

A somewhat husky but gentle voice travelled out from the hood.

“...Eh?” At that point I was figuring that I was dead anyway no matter how I went about it, I made a dumb-sounding whimper without thinking.

Looking closely, I realized that the person's looks were proper, and her skin was very white.

Despite the fact that she appeared to be a man from her actions alone, she was actually a girl... with looks that would classify her as a beauty among girls as well.

As she looked into my eyes as I was still sitting on the floor, she crouched down, surveyed her surroundings and began whispering to me.

“About what happened just now... I saw it pretty clearly. You pulled it off rather majestically, huh.”

“Um, and that is referring to...”

“The commotion just now at the sidewalk. But really, I didn’t imagine that you would cause such a ruckus...”

She saw the commotion earlier... which means, this person had followed me here all the way from the mess earlier.

If that was what happened, then she would have been part of the crowd chasing me...?

“I, I’ve already quit my job... so... please stop following me!! Um, regarding that, if you want an autograph or something I can give it to you...”

I said it. So I could express my thoughts pretty well after all.

Since I said it rather clearly, and the other person appeared to be rather calm, so she should be able to understand.

In this sort of situation, if it was just an autograph I could’ve done it immediately, if only the other person would be satisfied after that it would be great...

In order to get a good look at her reaction, I cautiously opened my eyes that were closed all the while, and realized she wore an expression with the words “I have no idea what you’re talking about” written all over it.

“Uh~... no, firstly I wasn’t chasing you and I don’t need an autograph or anything like that. Speaking of which you even quit your job because of this...?”

Her answer was completely different from what I was expecting.

She wasn’t chasing me? So that means she wasn’t a fan...

Just as I was about to relax, I realized something and immediately went on alert again.

If she wasn’t a fan, maybe this was a kidnapping or something like that.

Possible even for ransom!? An unavoidable danger!?

But the other person didn’t appear as if she was going to attack me, instead she stood up and stuck her hands in her pockets.

From there she took out her phone, which was an undecorated old thing without a case or anything.

“Anyway it’s still quite a long way from the predetermined time, and the fact that you’ve came here seems to be by luck, but luckily the place isn’t that far from here.”

“Eh? Pre, predetermined time meaning...?”

“Hmm? Yes, we’re supposed to meet about one... is there a problem?” I took out my phone once more, at this point the screen was filled with notifications of incredibly large amounts of missed calls and text messages.

Reality hit me in an instant, and a sensation like I had just swallowed a giant metal ball overwhelmed me.

The time displayed was 10:30.

An appointment... at one...

“Ah...”

That would explain everything.

This person is definitely one of the workers at the filming location.

That way, the fact that she followed me all the way here despite not being a fan could be explained.

Unquestionably, if this was true then she would definitely know of the time I was supposed to meet my agent. Maybe she had predicted there would be a commotion, then followed me so as to ensure I wouldn’t be late for the filming.

But even if this was true, I wouldn’t reply with something like “Oh, I understand now”.

I had clearly stated that I had “quit my job”.

But this person was still nonchalantly attempting to bring me somewhere, which was to be expected, but I didn’t feel like complying with her wishes.

I attempted to stand up in order to talk to the girl standing by the exit of the alley.

“Um... I’ve already quit my job. At the moment, I have no intention of going back. So um, can you understand what I’m getting at?”

This time I said it calmly, even clearer than what I had said previously. This time

the person should understand.

“...Yeah, I understand what you’re trying to say. So just follow me for now.”

She said that while looking into my eyes with a rather gentle expression. Then, she began walking.

If I had attempted it sooner I might’ve been able to escape, but after seeing the expression the person made after she said “I understand”, I couldn’t run away even if I wanted to.

Certainly after I reached the filming location, my agent would be there as well.

I would definitely receive a massive scolding.

Picturing those despairingly horrible situations in my head, my tear ducts loosened up yet again.

But, I needed to settle this right here.

Just end it today.

Completely expressing my feelings, then I would receive a large scolding, I would just end it at that.

I renewed my determination, and caught up with the girl.

As I jogged up to her I realized the part of my bag where I had previously buried my face in, had become rather damp due to my tears or something.

“Ah...”

“Hmm? Is something wrong?”

“Er, nothing... nothing happened here...”

“...Really? What’re you talking about, just look at your clothes and bag, it’ll be better after you give it a wash though.

With a “bang”, my face became so red it appeared to have caught on fire.

“Oh... OK...”

Her observation was incredibly accurate. This person must be good at her job.

Speaking of which I had been running around this whole day, which gave me an unnatural urge to take a shower.

This I thought while intentionally leaving a distance between myself and the girl wearing a jacket walking in front of me.

Walk out of the dead end, turn right. Turn left at the second four-way junction. Turn right into the first alley, then turn left at the end...

Silently walking behind the girl that had yet to utter a single word since we left, it had been about ten minutes.

The streets actually have these sort of places, I thought as we trudged further and further into the alleyways.

Today's filming location should be, "At a rather poor friend's house". Well, there were various apartments and houses lining the streets here that couldn't be called luxurious even in a flattering manner.

It appears that filming preparations were ongoing, so how should I get to the point.

My stomach began aching.

"Here."

The girl suddenly stopped and changed direction.

However, the path she was walking down on was a tunnel that appeared to be even more shabby-looking and sinister than all the others.

Only one person could pass through at a time with some grace, and that person would be caught between a thin wooden fence and apartment walls.

"This, this is rather narrow..."

The girl didn't bother replying but instead proceeded further down the alleyway. Was it a shortcut to the filming location? Even if it was it still seemed suspicious...

Once I went in, I felt unnaturally claustrophobic.

I wonder what would happen if I had bumped into a giant bug at that point.

Advancing carefully while looking down at the tips of my toes, the image of the girl that was supposed to be walking ahead of me suddenly burst into my field of vision, and I hurriedly stopped in my tracks.

“It’s right here.” As she said this she pointed in the direction of a door somewhere in the middle of the alleyway with the numbers “107” written on it. The wooden fence coincidentally had a door-shaped hole in that exact spot.

“Eh!? It’s, it’s here!?”

Before I had finished my sentence, she had already opened the door and walked in.

“Hey, hey... wait!?”

The door slammed shut, and I was left alone outside.

Once again observing the outer appearance of the building, there appeared to be only a cement wall above the door. There were no windows at all.

Just like a storage building or maybe an underground bunker, it didn’t look like a normal person’s house at all. But then, why would the door have the number “107” written on it?

“Speaking of which... this obviously isn’t a “friend’s house” right?”

If this was really a friend’s house, then that friend’s parents must’ve been researching some weird life form or something like that. Although there was a possibility that there would be a scene in the second episode containing a visit to a friend’s house whose parents were studying some UFO or whatever, but it was an extremely unlikely development from episode one.

The outer appearance of the building was indeed extremely suspicious, but I somehow had the urge to open the door and step inside.

There were no other doors with “107” written on it... feels against the law somehow.

“Meh... I don’t know the way back anyway, so I guess I can only go in...”

Succumbing to my curiosity, I opened the door as I exhaled a large breath, and as expected what was inside wasn’t the house of a female middle school student -.

After opening the door what I saw was a wide open space about fifteen tatami mats long.

Uncovered tubes were all over the ceiling with seemingly infinitely many naked light bulbs hanging down from them, and the illuminated room had various sorts of furniture like glass tables, sofas and so on. A globe model was placed on top of an ancient-looking cabinet along with other small memorabilia, giving the place a secret base-ish feel.

There were also things like a television and microwave, a computer and a fridge and other household electrical appliances, which gave the air-conditioned room a rather homely feeling.

But judging from the ancient books that were obviously not written in Japanese neatly arranged on an equally ancient cabinet, it was still a rather improbable situation, to describe the room in a more appropriate fashion would be more like the office of a modern witch.

On the innermost wall, four doors were lined up. So there were more rooms inside, I observed as I wondered how exactly the architectural structure of this place looks like.

Close to the entrance, there was a kitchen with neatly lined cooking apparatus, and the girl from just now was standing there. As I looked around, there weren't any filming tools nor staff members, as expected.

The feeling of slight unease when I entered the room, was slowly but surely taking root within me.

"U, um... where exactly is this..."

"This useless fellow over here is Kano. Anyway just explain the situation to her... get up!"

Ignoring my question, the girl in the hood began yelling at some guy lying on a couch.

As I was wondering whether I saw that guy shivering earlier, I heard a lazy-sounding voice. "Ugh... hmm? Eh? It's this kid?"

Shifting the magazine covering his head slightly, the cat-eyed teenager revealed a dazed expression like someone that had just woken up.

"It's the newbie you said would come today, talk to her yourself."

“Nope, eh...? I was just wondering why it’s this kid...?”

“Haven’t you woken up yet!? Explain this. Now.”

“Hnng~ um... meh forget it. I understand.”

The teenager named Kano sat up on the couch and looked at me. He seemed to remember something after that, and revealed a suspicious smile.

“Eh? Wait, u-um... -“

“Welcome newbie-san! Welcome to the Mekakushi Dan! Thank you for participating in this mission!” (TL note: For those new to Kagerou Project: Mekakushi Dan = Blindfold Gang, the gang which the story revolves around.) He slowly stood up from the couch, with a cheerful yet warm smile completely different from the one before, speaking in an exaggerated manner as though to brush off my question.

“Anyway today’s activity is to avoid the “attention” of the police and prevent them from discovering our facility and taking away our stuff. I’ll explain the other things in detail later, well of course there are some things we can’t tell you, “But just forgive us for now, I’ll just tell you what you need to know. Anyway, this is our base. You should’ve guessed that by now of course, and the one that wanted to decorate the place like this was of course the one with the really scary eyes sitting right there...”

“Ooh this is scary, or should I say our commander, Kido. So just take it easy, relax a bit, regarding our members there’s the commander over there... and me, “Kano, of course, and two others... Well maybe even three others, yeah that’s about it. Normally we don’t do much together in public, we’re just free and easy, y’know? Aaaaaand there’s also...”

“Wait, wait!! Hold on for a second! Uh, um, what...? Interesting facilities? You, you are talking about today’s drama filming right!? Where’s the director...? I, I’ve already quit my job as an idol! I came here just to say that! But... you... who are you people!?”

Everything was happening too suddenly, my brain just couldn’t catch up. I had too many things to ask.

Is this another scene... no, that would be impossible.

The script I had received, was a perfectly normal and bland schoolyard love comedy.

It didn't have anything related to secret bases or infiltration or stuff like that.

The other guy was describing this all too normally so I began listening unconsciously, but despite this, I was obviously being mistaken for someone else. Taking part in missions...? I hadn't even heard of that sort of thing. Ah, but I would be OK with it if it were a side job, even my career as an idol was decided upon a whim so this shouldn't be that big of an issue.

"...Wait a minute. You said something about being an idol..., what the hell is going on Kano!?"

The guy named Kano that only smiled at my questions was being interrogated by the girl in the hood named Kido who was the commander or something.

"Eh? What do you mean what's going on, this kid right here, is a super-popular idol you know. Look here."

He flipped open the magazine he used to cover his head with previously, and showed its contents to the girl in the hood.

In it was published an article related to my limited edition single being released today. Argh, that photo was one of my most hated ones as well... it was a two-page photo but my eyes were half open... this is too much...

The girl in the hood snatched the magazine from him, then began comparing the girl in it to me as her face began turning increasingly darker shades of green.

"Eh... what... you, didn't you say that there would be an appointment with a new applicant so you wanted me to take a look...?"

"Yep. I did say that. I lied."

"And you said it would be interesting... hey, isn't this fellow an idol!! – You lied!?"

The hooded female said that while frantically pounding on the magazine article with my face published on it.

Even when I was right there... how rude...

“No, I did clearly say I lied, but if I remember correctly little miss Kido was listening to music at the time and didn’t reply at all. And weren’t you the one that brought her here alone? You reap what you sow, you know.”

“Well, you didn’t get up when I called you so of course I went alone!! Speaking of which why didn’t you give me a call when you woke up!?”

“Because whenever Kido listens to music she never picks up the phone anyway. The music just never stops. Not to mention making a phone call is very troublesome, you know.

“Oh you bastard...”

“- W, wait!!”

Both of them looked at me simultaneously. The guy named Kano was still smiling, but the girl had an all too scary expression on her face.

“Um... so, did you get the wrong person...?”

I asked nervously. The girl named Kido scratched her head through her hood, then sighed and said.

“Ah... it seems that way. Sorry, it’s my fault, so you can go back...”

At this point she seemed to have noticed something else again, and her face turned green once more.

On the other hand, the guy named Kano was concealing his laughter while sitting on the couch again.

“You!! Why did you tell her everything even when you knew she wasn’t the correct person!? We can’t just let her go back if you’ve even told her about our missions!”

“Ahaha... it’s not like that, it’s because you were pushing me to explain as quickly as possible. Ah~ ah, this is bad, this situation is incredibly interesting –“

The guy named Kano received a heavy blow to his head.

The girl named Kido that had suddenly turned around again, suddenly turned from expressionlessness to what appeared to be panic with a little anger mixed in. Looking at that expression, I suddenly thought “She’s probably around my

age, maybe a little older..." and other thoughts, my nervousness suddenly disappearing.

In that sort of situation I should have felt extremely nervous, but since those two didn't show any nervousness anyway, I felt rather at ease instead. Something about a Dan and a secret base and stuff like that, although it did sound rather suspicious, I didn't feel as though they were bad people.

"U, um..."

I opened my mouth as if to ask another question, but was instead interrupted again.

"Sigh... what's your name?"

"Eh?"

The girl named Kido sat down next to the guy named Kano and asked a question while sighing.

"I asked for your name. Mine's Kido, and this guy over here with the glazed-over face is Kano."

No matter whether it was the way she spoke or the way she addressed herself in first-person, she still gave off a tomboyish air.

The guy who was just teased at was still beaming at me while waving, despite the fact that he seemed rather mature, upon closer look he was around my age as well.

"Ah, um, my name's Kisaragi Momo. I'm sixteen this year..."

When they asked for my name, I instinctively gave them my age as well. It wasn't a habit or anything, it's just that it reminded me of being questioned during singing tryouts when I was still an idol.

Maybe I would be laughed at for proclaiming "I'm an idol (conceitedly)". Argh this is bad... that would be too embarrassing.

"Kisaragi eh. You really sound like an idol, reporting your age as well and whatnot." This is bad.

"No! It's not like that! It's not because it's a habit from tryouts or anything it's

just a coincidence!! Um, because I have no friends, so I tend to say strange things when talking to others! Ahaha... haha..."

- The silence I was greeted with was almost painful. If there was a hole nearby I would've bury myself as far as I could into it, and just stay there for the rest of my life.

"So that's how it is... um, anyway that was rather interesting I guess."

"Um, yeah..."

I was comforted.

The guy named Kano began giggling again, and shut up after Kido punched him in the stomach.

"But this really is a pain... honestly, I really do want to let you go home now, but since we've already screwed up and revealed all the details to you, we would have problems if we did."

"Yeah... since you've already heard everything..."

"It's all this idiot's fault."

"Ahaha, that's why I said everything was that Kido's fault earlier... well maybe not."

Immediately after Kido-san turned to look at him, he hurriedly corrected himself, then hugged his stomach as though to protect himself.

"Um, this might not exactly be that bad of a thing you know. Just now when I was coincidentally watching a namahousou online, that 'power' of yours really is pretty impressive." (TL note: Japanese culture class time! As most of you know, Nico Nico Douga or Niconico/Nicovideo for short is the Japanese equivalent of Youtube, and a namahousou refers to a livestream of sorts that their users can film for a price. In this case, Kano is referring to the fact that he saw Momo's performance online.) Online...? Namahousou...? Was it a recording from the commotion earlier? A lot of people saw it after all.

"Impressive is referring to this fellow?"

"Yep. Also, you, before you were an idol you were already attracting the attention of others, weren't you?"

“Eh? Y, yes, exactly... as you said...”

I was rather shaken upon hearing that sentence.

Kano-san saw my reaction, and revealed an expression with the words “So that’s how it is” written all over it.

“Judging from that it must be a rather tough ability to handle right? I really must give you credit for coming up with the idea of becoming an idol.”

The attitude seemed to see right through me, giving me the impression that he was inspecting my inner thoughts.

“Because my mom’s job was in a rather difficult situation, so I wanted to help... but how would you know...”

“Hmm? It’s not just a guess you know? That method of yours to attract the attention of others isn’t exactly ‘normal’ as well. In fact it’s just the opposite of Kido. If Mary had an ability like yours she’d probably be dead by now, haha.”

“Mary is a special case, after all. Besides, their backgrounds are different anyway.”

“Well that is true, of course. Ah, speaking of which that guy hasn’t come out yet, is he still angry?” I once again reverted to a state of confusion. They didn’t look like bad people to me, but I still didn’t know what kind of people they were, not to mention what would happen to me after this.

“Ah, my apologies, Um, anyway just sit down first.”

“Um, OK...”

They indicated that I should sit at the sofa opposite from the table.

Sitting opposite from Kano, I suddenly got the impression that I was about to receive a psychological analysis.

“Essentially speaking, if we let you go back after hearing what Kido had just said you’d undoubtedly have a lot of questions unanswered. So we want to let you stay here momentarily, and since it’ll inconvenience you, we have a proposal for you in return.”

“A, a proposal?”

“Yes. Essentially we will cure you of your ability. To put it more accurately we’ll help you to “control” it, I suppose? Anyway, we’ll help you on that. Of course, this is only if you need it, hey? Kido, that’s all we have to do on our part right?”

“Hmm... yeah, pretty much. Anyway we still can’t let her go back for now.”

That was the sentence that made me question my ears the most today.

The first time I had met someone that would “do something” about my ability.

But of course I wouldn’t believe them so easily.

Judging from the previous conversation, there was a possibility that they only wanted to attract my attention.

It wasn’t even a disease in the first place, so as for “curing” it, how exactly would they go about doing it.

If it was something I could do myself I would’ve done it a long time ago. I just couldn’t imagine it.

“Well, that sounds tempting... if you could cure it that would be great...”

“Ah, so you do want to cure it. But, you clearly don’t even have the ability to control it. Anyway, everyone has their own problems to deal with, so we won’t be able to cure it if we don’t keep trying.”

“Keep trying...”

In the end can I really trust this guy?

Until now I still couldn’t tell what kind of character he was, and he seemed to be doing some “bad things”.

However, I had not met a single person to date who had claimed to understand my ability.

“If I could be normal”, this shallow hope I had, in this situation it was exactly as if I wanted to rely upon someone who was living a perfectly normal life.

“Ah... I really do miss this feeling. Before, I had even said something like this to Kido.”

While looking at my face, Kano-san closed his eyes as though he had remembered something.

“Something like that may have even happened before, you know.”

“At that time Kido was still pretty cute... ‘At this rate I’m going to disappear, someone please help me’ ouchouchouch, it hurts!!” (TL note: Kano was quoting Kido, in case you didn’t catch that.) Before he could finish his sentence, Kido-san had pinched and twisted Kano’s waist. Continuously sustaining heavy attacks on that area, would he be alright...

“Before that it would’ve been better if you disappeared instead.”

Even when being reprimanded, Kano still had a smile on his face.

“It’s not like that, it’s just that I wanted to say that it wasn’t a bad memory... speaking of which you probably wouldn’t believe us even if we said “cure”, so show it to her, Kido, will you?”

“Why does it have to be me, can’t you do it?”

“No, because mine is harder to comprehend, isn’t it? Technically the easiest to understand would be Mary’s, but she’s definitely still angry so that would be a pain.”

“Sigh... I understand, I do have some responsibility in this anyway.”

Kido sighed as she stood up, then walked towards one of the doors on the far wall. As she opened the door second from the right, what appeared to be a foldable bed was visible within the room.

“Uh... what exactly did you mean when you told her to show it to me?”

“Ah, no, it’s just evidence to prove to you that we can “cure your ability”, is all. It should be pretty easy to understand...”

Evidence? What was it? Maybe it would be an example of someone cured who had the ability to attract even more attention than I did.

There wouldn’t be any dietary methods or anything like that, and it wasn’t possible for there be a “before and after” comparison for something like this...

As I was thinking the door closed shut, and Kido disappeared from the room.

Kano was still smiling. Anyway he seemed to be waiting for Kido to bring in someone (?).

I was beginning to anticipate who it might be as well.

... Speaking of which, Kido hadn't returned for almost a minute.

Looking at the clocks hanging on the wall ranging from dove-shaped to digital designs and so on, I somehow didn't feel that time was dragging along as people usually do when waiting for something.

With a smile on his face as usual Kano was reading a magazine normally. The door didn't appear as if it would open anytime soon, so what exactly was I waiting for?

"-Um, aaaaaahhhhhhh!!"

As I turned around to ask what exactly Kano was waiting for, a sight that should've been impossible lay before me, and I screamed uncontrollably.

Beside Kano who was still leisurely flipping through the magazine, Kido had reappeared in the same seating position she had before she left.

There were no obstructing objects between my seat and the door, and I didn't get up from my seat or anything.

"W... w, w, why...!? When did it happen!?"

Facing this unexpected turn of events, I hurriedly jumped up, with the entire couch threatening to topple backwards corresponding with my movement. Kido merely started at me coldly, as if to say "You're being too noisy".

"Anyway that's just about what it feels like! You surprised!?"

Upon seeing me bump into the backrest of the couch, Kano exclaimed happily.

"Sigh... you people stop exaggerating already, don't stare at me like you would a ghost or something"

"We can't help it when you are in the first place – ouch!"

Being hit in the abdomen for the umpteenth time, Kano still didn't stop smiling. Being able to smile even in this situation, probably has something to do with self-pride or something like that.

"What, what was that just now?"

Anyway I sat down on the couch again first, questioning what I had saw earlier.

To be honest, I was still somewhat afraid of Kido, so I couldn't look her in the eye.

"Kido's the same as you. Well more of the opposite, Kido had the ability to remain "unnoticed" since young."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"After seeing that you should be able to understand now, you really couldn't see her, huh? Probably felt like nothing had changed."

I really hadn't noticed anything. As I averted my eyes momentarily she had appeared, exactly as though she had suddenly teleported there.

Just like magic.

"But since some time ago we had some training to control our abilities, thus we were only able to achieve this effect. Anyway this was what I meant when I said we had evidence –"

I stretched out my body as if I was going to slam into the table, then shouted.

"I want to stay here!! House, household chores or whatever, I'll do it as long as it's within my ability to!! They were called missions right? I'll try my best at those too!! Please let me join... the Mekakushi Dan!"

It wasn't too early to give up on society.

Despite that I had went through various hardships related to this ability, it was the first time that someone had gave me such high hopes for myself.

If I stayed here my ability could definitely be cured.

Going out shopping normally, talking normally, making friends normally, all this I could do eventually!

"So, then... this deserves to be celebrated! Regarding the name Mekakushi Dan, that's the important point."

"Mekakushi Dan!! I will do my best!"

"No, could you try to use that weird name as little as possible or just not use it at all? It's not like we'll ever get the chance to introduce ourselves."

Kido whispered after hearing the mindless conversation between me and

Kano. “Mekakushi Dan sounds like a cool name! I will be under your care for now, Commander!”

“W, what is this all of a sudden... a, anyway let’s get to know each other for now, Kisaragi.”

“O...OK!!”

“That’s it isn’t it? Although you’re muttering about all this and all that but secretly you’re overjoyed since no one’s ever called you Commander before right – ouch! Ouch!”

Um... this time she twisted his arm in an unnatural direction... but he was still smiling!

It appears Kano really does have a really strong sense of dignity.

Smiling bitterly that I had already gotten used to that sort of conversation in such a short period of time, it was at that moment when the door on the far right of the wall opened.

What appeared from it was, almost as if she had appeared from a colouring book, a tiny white-haired girl.

“Oh? So you’ve finally came out, eh Mary...”

The girl who had just been called turned to look at us, then running back to her room as though she had just seen a monster.

“...So she really did go back in.”

“Were you expecting that? Mary really is rather shy.”

“Ah – sorry, that fellow over there just now was Mary. We were going to introduce her earlier...”

“U, um... it seems like she hates me... Although I was used to being looked at in a weird fashion by others, it was still rather hurtful whenever it happened.

“Nah, she does that to everyone so don’t take particular notice of it. Kano, go get her will you?”

“Eh~? Of course not. I don’t want to get her angry and get eaten by “that thing”.

“It’s your own fault why that guy’s in a bad mood. It only became this way because you were laughing to bits just because he was wearing socks slightly different from the usual.”

“Because it just didn’t suit him, you know? Kido, weren’t you pretending to not notice as well?”

“It, it’s not like I said it was funny or anything! It’s best not to say anything under those circumstances anyway.”

“You’re wrong, whenever Mary wear socks she’s always extremely attentive of her surroundings. No matter what you do it’s still the same, isn’t it?... Anyway the door probably won’t be opening up any more so how about you go get her out. It’s not as if we’re contesting on who would be the better choice right?”

“You...”

“Look at it this way. In this situation a girl like you should go instead so as to not cause any more conflicts, am I right?”

“...Sigh... I get it. I don’t care what happens to you after I get her out though, you understand?”

Kido walked to the far end of the room, and opened the door the girl named Mary had walked into.

“Urgh!?”

The door opened followed by the tiny sounds of someone sobbing. After the door had opened fully, it was obvious that the little girl was trying her best to hold in her tears while pressing her hands on her forehead.

Maybe she had been waiting behind the door all this time, which was why she appeared to have been knocked on the head by the door. Kido pointed into the room with her thumb, which was when the girl took a quick glance inside, then shook her head with tears still in her eyes.

“Well, um... it appears she really hates me huh...”

“No, it’s just because Mary’s a top-class hikikomori... speaking of which this situation is pretty tough to handle. (TL note: Time for Japanese culture class again, lesson #2. Hikikomori is Japanese for someone who is a shut-in.) Kano

didn't appear to take particular notice, instead he picked up the magazine once more and continued reading.

As Kido-san was still frantically trying to convince Mary to come out, we could hear soft voices coming from behind the door. Although they weren't particularly clear, the small snatches of pessimistic words the young girl uttered like "It's too scary" and "I can't do it" were enough to pierce through my heart like tiny needles.

Just as I was about to mention that to Kano, I heard the sound of a door slamming shut.

Closing the magazine he had been reading, Kano began clapping his hands lightly.

Kido went back to her seat, and the young girl that appeared to be almost stuck between the two sat down as well.

She really looks like a doll up close... With pink eyes, skin even whiter than Kido's and a head of long and beautiful-looking white hair, she looked like a character straight out of a fairy tale.

But she continued to droop her head downwards, constantly darting her eyes from left to right, looking at the table which had nothing on it to look at, and chanting a litany using a voice I could hear all the way where I was sitting: "It'll be fine... it'll be fine...".

"Sorry for making you wait, this girl over here is Mary."

She appeared to be shocked at hearing her name being mentioned, with her shoulders shaking, she nervously lifted her head up.

Upon closer look she really looked like a hikikomori. If a new member like me doesn't introduce myself at this point!

"Um, it's the first time we're meeting Mary-san! Uh, um my name's Kisaragi! From today onwards I'll be in your care! S, so, I'll do my best so please look out for me!"

Despite the fact that when I opened my mouth to speak Mary was shocked to the point of being frozen on the spot, my words appeared to get through to her,

and when I had finished her expression looked gentler than it was previously.

“...”

However, Mary remained frozen in that position.

“Er...ahaha... that’s, that’s essentially it...”

Trying my best not to remain silent, I clumsily attempted to continue the conversation. Instead, my efforts created an awkward silence between the four of us. I should get some books on communication next time...

But surprisingly that silence didn’t continue for very long.

“I, I’m... Mary... it’s, it’s the first time we’re meeting...” Mary’s eyes began darting from side to side again, and her snow-white skin began to redden until it reached the tips of her ears.

“I, I’ll make some tea!”

She’d probably already reached her limit, I figured, which was when Mary stood up and trotted towards the kitchen.

“Ah! It, it’s fine!”

She had finally mustered the courage to talk to me, but then she had immediately left her seat...

“Wow... Mary was really trying her best this time, huh.”

“That was surprising, I think that was the first time she spoke so much with someone she had just met right?”

Both of them began complimenting Mary simultaneously.

“Eh!? Really!?”

The conversation earlier that couldn’t even be considered a conversation, was actually being considered as “speaking so much”. I was unable to hide my shock at that.

“Despite all that, you’re only around the fourth person Mary has ever spoken to, so I guess there aren’t much comparisons we can make.”

“The fourth!? What exactly has Mary been doing all this time...?”

“How should I put this...um~ using modern terms I guess she’d be called a NEET?” (TL note: Japanese culture lesson #3. NEET is a common acronym used in Japan standing for “Not Employed, Educated nor in Training”. Essentially an even worse form of shut-in.) Kano said this while looking over at Kido.

“Yeah. She really doesn’t go out of her room a lot, so you could say she’s a hikikomori as well.”

“Oh... I see.”

Listening to their explanations, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for Mary who had been reduced to a hikikomori.

“But I was thinking we should be doing something about this by now? Considering she’s already been a hikiNEET for two years this seems a bit too much, huh.”

“I’ve mentioned that to her countless times already. Every time I touch upon that subject she starts to ignore me, nothing I can do about it.”

“I guess so... hmm? Is something wrong, Kisaragi-chan?”

The fact that she had been a hikiNEET for two years reminded me of something else instead, and I probably had an expression of speechlessness written all over my face, which was noticed by Kano.

Although he had an expression of curiosity on his face like a gigantic “?”, he didn’t pursue the matter.

“But it does seem like Kisaragi-chan joining the Dan won’t be a bad thing altogether for Mary.”

“Yeah. She did look pretty happy.”

“Eh!? Really? How... how could you tell?” “Take a look at this, Mary even brought out her two favorite cups for you. She definitely wouldn’t let us use them, so it must’ve been for you then, Kisaragi-chan.”

Looking in the direction of the kitchen, Mary was preparing the tea somewhat clumsily, with four white teacups placed on a tray.

At first glance the value of the cups weren’t exactly discernible, but two of them didn’t have patterns on them, whereas the other two were embellished

with designs of mythical animals.

“Ah...”

Just seeing that made me feel happy.

Because Mary who couldn't even communicate with others, let alone flatter someone actually brought out her favorite teacup for me.

This must be the way she shows her affection towards others.

Something near my chest tightened slightly.

When I thought about it, it had been a really, really long time since I've talked to a girl my age.

Even in school, due to my irregular working schedule and my ability, I really had never gotten the chance to talk to someone face-to-face.

“I was rather worried initially but it looks like they're getting along pretty well anyway. So it does work better when both parties are girls! There hasn't been such a response since –“

As Kano said this he looked at Kido-san, and realized that her expression was somewhat awkward.

I immediately realized what it meant, and Kano even let out a nervous cry of “Uh...” “Yeah... I really don't look like a girl at all like this huh... well, sorry about that...!”

“Wait! Hold on! What are you saying! Even someone like Kido still secretly switches hair conditioner and stuff like that, and even wears frilly dresses in front of the mirr-OUCHOUCHOUCH”

There was no other way about it, it was Kano's fault after all.

“Speaking of which Kisaragi, shouldn't you contact your agency or something? Just don't make the situation worse than it already is.”

“Ah!! Yes! I completely forgot!”

“Before that Kido, could you stop for a moment...! I'm sorry I'm sorry it was my fault it was my fault!”

Kido continued to twist Kano's wrist painfully, not relenting an inch.

Anyway I should call my agent... no, that would be too scary. I should just summarize everything in a text first...

I took out my phone, and noticed that the amount of new text messages and missed calls had once again increased by a huge sum.

My stomach began aching again.

How should I explain this situation? Thinking about it, this sort of development was really rather rare.

Anyway I should just try to type out the contents of the text first.

“Subject: I wish to quit my job as an idol.

Body: I’m currently in the base of an organization known as the Mekakushi Dan. I think they can cure my ability. Please don’t worry. Also tell my family members not to worry as well. I’m really sor-“

- As I typed that, I released my biggest sigh of the day.

If I sent this text, they would probably think I ate some sort of weird poisonous mushroom or something.

Looking at the contents of the message, it clearly wouldn’t look like something a normal person would send.

“Um... how should I explain this? This situation...?”

“...Ah...so sorry...”

The glance I had directed at Kido to request assistance was probably misunderstood as blaming her for dragging me here, as she merely remained speechless with a panicked expression on her face.

“Um, anyway the contents of this message are definitely a no-go... are there any better ways to phrase this...”

“Um, sorry for making you wait so long for the tea...!! Waah!!”

As I was staring at my phone, about to commence a new text message, a gush of tea sprayed at me from my right-hand side.

A rather large amount of liquid drenched my phone and my head.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Faced with this sudden occurrence, I let out the umpteenth cry I had made today which echoed throughout the room. Being sprayed by the tea was one reason, while the other was that the words “Sending message...” were displayed on the phone screen.

“Aaaaah! Waah!? So-sorry sorry sorry!!”

“Stop, stop mentioning it and just bring a towel here!”

Kido hurriedly pointed a finger in the direction of the kitchen as an indication to Mary who had just taken a heavy fall.

I pressed the “Cancel” button on my phone with all the strength I could muster, but there was no response.

The message inevitably sent itself, and as though it had completed its final duty, the phone immediately went out. What exactly did that kid do...

“I, I’ve got the cloth – whoa!”

This time a completely un-wringed wet cloth smacked into my head.

Ice-cold liquid was flowing down my hair, dripping onto the floor.

I looked around with the wet cloth still stuck on my head.

I saw Mary whose face was completely pale and looked as if she was going to cry.

I saw Kano who still could bear to laugh in a situation like this.

I saw Kido scratching at her head through her hood, with a troubled expression on her face.

- Ah...now I’m in trouble. But somehow, I felt as if everything was fine. For some reason, I felt an irresistible surge of happiness overwhelm me.

It had been a really really really long time since I’ve felt this way.

This could be the result of me misunderstanding way too many things, however.

At that time I thought, “So this is the so-called ‘youth’, huh.”

Was this how it feels like, to fool around with the other gang members beyond reason?

Outside the room the sun was releasing blinding rays of light.

The cicadas were probably still shouting their loud cries over and over.

On that summer day, I made a decision.

As if to test my resolve, I attempted to speak.

“-I, will try my best in the Mekakushi Dan!”

Kagerou Daze III

When did it first begin?

The very first time, as in.

I was supposed to stay over at Hiyori's relative's place in order to attend some seminars over the summer holidays.

That's what was supposed to happen.

And at that place, what was the name of that white-haired guy again?

At first I thought it was a rather strange name.

But I guess I don't have the right to judge others. My name, Hibiya is a pretty strange name as well, I guess.

He was tall and did things at his own pace.

I should ask Hiyori. She might remember.

It's just that I feel like I've already asked for it countless times.

What was it again... forget it.

Speaking of which where did Hiyori run off to?

We should've went out together.

With me going alone instead, has this scenario ever occurred?

I felt like it had, but at the same time I felt like it hadn't.

Funny... it was even raining.

This is probably the first time...

In this dream that I've repeated countless times,

The rain unpredicted in the weather forecast seemed to make the streets appear different.

Regardless of noisy calls of the cicadas,

Or the rising heat haze, today my shadow was completely hidden.

“Hey...you.”

“What?”

“You, did you come here alone?”

“No... I came with a friend, but she got lost.”

“A friend?”

“Yes. Usually we’re always together. But today for some reason I feel I won’t be able to meet her...”

“Really. Do you want to see ‘her’?”

“Yes.” “Fine. Everything will be alright. No matter whether it’s you or her...”

“... Where are you going?”

“You can follow me if you want, but promise me you won’t regret it?”

“I won’t.”

“Then come with me. Someone just like you, coming to help, is definitely waiting out there.”

“Help...?”

“Using their ‘eyes’, and your ‘eyes’, we’ll definitely be able to see something...”

“- So whatever you do, don’t forget what happened today.”

Chapter 3: Mekakushi Code

The liquid gently flowed down, adhering to the curves of my body. Technically it was the shower I had been craving for since this morning, but I didn't expect to receive it in this manner.

In the secret base of the Mekakushi Dan,

With my phone and I both drenched in tea,

Concluding with one-sided apologies, the situation ended up like this.

To put it in words it would sound even stranger, something like the saying "Reality can be stranger than a television drama script."

After showering, I returned to the room while wiping my hair. The three of them looked in my direction shortly, after which the situation immediately returned to normal.

An old clock hanging on the wall was still swinging its pendulum from side to side, tick-tock, tick-tock.

The time was just after 11:30.

"I'm really sorry, you guys even lent me your clothes..."

"No problem, it was our fault in the first place. But really what was that..."

"Yeah... ha... ah! No wait! It's fine! Everything's fine! OK!?"

Despite the fact that she had apologized countless times since just now, but even if I uttered a small sigh Mary-chan's eyes would begin to fill to the brim with tears.

"But... but...!"

Mary-chan was holding onto an airtight bag virtually completely filled up with drier, not to mention my phone that had been drenched in tea earlier.

On the table that was cleaned extremely well lay a small mountain of snacks that we had opened to retrieve the drier within.

“I... I need to pay you back somehow...”

“What do you mean payback, where are you gonna get the money? Selling your books?”

Kido heartlessly said that while lazing about on the couch and reading the magazine from earlier, which of course made Mary-chan start crying again.

“Ah!! Please, stop it Commander!!”

“There’s no other way. She really has no way to pay for this.”

“But, but still... Ma, Mary-chan, it’s really fine if you don’t do anything. Hmm? Stop crying~”

Despite my attempts to comfort her, she continued to cry while holding the airtight container.

“But the real problem is, it must be terrible to not have a way to get in contact with the outside world. Kisaragi-chan would be in trouble if she doesn’t submit some sort of report right?”

Kano said this with the same old smile on his face, and intentionally shrugged his shoulders.

“Hmm, yeah... that’s true...”

The contents of that text message were indeed horrible.

I had a feeling that the situation could only get worse. Although I didn’t know of it at the time, there was actually a live newscast in the morning titled “Super-popular idol suddenly goes missing!? Possibly kidnapped!?”, and it was slowly but surely becoming a hot topic.

“Let’s not mention your agent’s number for now, but you should at least be able to remember your house number right?”

Speaking of my agency’s phone number, Kano had already found it earlier and attempted to contact them, but he couldn’t get through as all their lines were busy.

“...Well, about that...”

“Eh...? Don’t tell me Kisaragi-chan you...”

“Um, no, I’m just not very good with numbers! I, I remember clearly that all the numbers in it added together give 50!”

“What kind of useless information is that?”

“Um...”

Ever since this morning, it appeared that I was being patronized for the extent of my unintelligence.

“Ah, the police have probably been involved as well, so this place probably will be discovered soon...”

“If that happens than all of us will probably be arrested on charges of kidnapping right... If the phone was fine we wouldn’t be in this situation...”

Kido sighed and looked at Mary-chan who was so shocked that she began shivering, and released an even larger torrent of tears.

The situation was indeed very serious, but I got that feeling that the other two (probably because they got to bully Mary-chan) were indeed enjoying it very much.

“So how about we let Mary take a daily-paying job, and slowly earn the money back!”

Kido suddenly unleashed a dazzling smile, and said that while clapping.

“Sounds like a plan. Hmm... oh, there appears to be a job as a traffic officer. The best part is, no prior experience is required.”

Kido slammed the magazine flipped open to the job application section, which had a drawing of a man wearing a white helmet and waving a red light stick.

Mary stopped crying upon seeing the advertisement, but then turned a shade of green instead.

“Nah, this one here looks better. ‘With your sweat everyone’s lives will be better! Penguin label 石風呂 shipping! Uh, um... the pay is a bit low, but both genders can apply!’”

“Isn’t it great to have the opportunity to train one’s body as well? Speaking of which, come back here will you?”

Kido took hold of the sleeve of Mary-chan who had put down the airtight bag she had been carefully holding onto the table, stood up silently and was attempting to sneak away, and set her back down on the couch.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Despite being questioned by Kido, Mary-chan’s face had an expression of immense fear for her own personal safety, larger than that of which she had for my phone.

A drawing of a cute pink-colored penguin was on the open pages of the job application magazine. It appeared to be the mascot of the shipping company, although it did look cute, but in contrast this slogan that instantly reminded me of the stink of sweat was written underneath: “No experience needed. No matter male or female, as long as you welcome physical activity and are in good shape, feel free to sign up!”

“Wait a second, wouldn’t this be a bit too hard on Mary-chan?”

“No, this is what we call experiencing society! Look here, the working hours can even stretch from six in the morning to eleven at night!”

Kano’s expression had changed from his usual warm smile to a sinister sneer, which he directed towards Mary-chan.

With every sentence, Mary-chan would react with an “Eh?”

Why did this seem like bullying?

“Enough! This is just too pitiful! Mary-chan looks troubled enough!”

Immediately after I snatched the job application magazine from atop the table, Mary-chan looked at me as though I were some sort of goddess.

“Seriously speaking, that may be true but it’s about time that we reveal to Mary how cruel society can be. She can’t just go on being a NEET forever, you know.”

Kano spoke while stretching lazily against the armrest of the couch, while Kido nodded her head with an “Mm.”

So does that mean the two of them were in some line of work?

“I, I have been working as well...!”

Mary-chan unexpectedly attempted to explain.

But Kido and Kano instead continued talking as though to drown out her explanations.

“Eh? That side business of making paper flowers? Don’t you only earn 500 yen a month?”

“Five, five hundred yen!?”

Upon hearing that their income was only in the three-digit range, I was unable to contain my shock and yelled aloud.

Observing my reaction, Mary-chan’s face turned as red as a beetroot due to embarrassment.

“That’s true... but, I really have been trying my best at making them myself one by one...”

“You... only charge about 5 yen for one of those things right? And you only make three or four a day anyway...”

Kido said that with a sigh.

Kano relentlessly pressed the attack.

“A normal person probably would earn about a hundred times Mary does per day right? Right? Kisaragi-chan?”

“Eh!? You’re asking me!?”

Mary-chan looked at me as if to say “save me”. But honestly, I couldn’t exactly play along with her when their monthly earnings were a measly 500 yen.

“Uh, um... no! With this sort of thing everyone has their own pace, yes that’s it! So Mary-chan’s job is really amazing... so to speak!”

“...Even though it only generates one coin a month?”

“Yes, even if she only earns one coin a month...!”

While replying Kido’s questions without any sign of backing down, I looked

over at Mary who was still extremely nervous only to realize that she was looking at us with a rather satisfied expression.

Although my inner thoughts were still chaotic, that at least gave me a slight breather. But I did feel uneasy regarding that kid's future.

"Hmm... meh, considering we're already in this situation, the only thing we can do is let Kisaragi-chan pay for the phone first then."

Kano confirmed this with Kido, who merely nodded her head.

"Fine then! Isn't this great Mary, Kisaragi-chan said that she will pay for it herself instead!"

"Eh!? Um, isn't this... eh!?"

Facing a sudden drastic change in the situation, I felt rather confused.

"Hmm? So you want Mary to pay for it then?"

Kano faced me with an overly cheerful smile.

"...! No, there's no need.... I, I'll pay for it..."

"She said it! Isn't this great Mary!"

"So we finally settled this huh."

Even though I had decided from the start that I would pay for the phone myself, I had a sneaking suspicion that I was being led into a trap. I guess these people really give off this sort of atmosphere...

Secretly, I thought this was a rather weird organization.

"Um... is, is this really OK...?"

Mary-chan looked at me uneasily.

"Ah! Uh, um! No problem!"

Well the real problem was that the money I earned from my "job" had all been surrendered to my parents to take care of so the only spendable cash I had was my pocket money, so if I could only rely on this month's cash then we'd have a problem.

Luckily I didn't have any friends to go out with so I had saved up tons of

money, so if I could just get to it the problem would be solved -.

“But this amount may not be enough... is it really OK? Kisaragi-chan?”

“I’ll think of something... wait!! Why is my wallet with you!? Eh? When!?”

The wallet that Kano was searching openly, was the wallet that had supposed to be inside my bag.

After some checking, I found that my wallet really wasn’t inside my bag. When the heck did he take it...

“Wah! Kisaragi-chan you should really throw away all those receipts~! Speaking of which haven’t you been eating too much dried mango peels?”

“You’re always buying these every day and what’s this... dried fish snacks. Are you trying to train your teeth or something?”

Kano took out a huge bundle of receipts from my wallet, and Kido was looking at them as well.

“Uh, whoa, what’s this drink? Something carbonated... bean soup? You’ve been buying these daily since. You poisoned or something?”

Even Mary who was spectating from the side began to laugh, which made my face so red that it looked as if it was going to release a jet of flames.

“Waaaaaaah!!”

Using an overly dramatic move to gather up all the receipts on the table at once, I snatched my wallet away from Kano.

“You, what are you doing!? Looking at other people’s wallets without permission...!”

“Eh? Didn’t you... not realize?”

If I had known something like this would happen I would’ve bought sandwiches and red tea daily from the clubhouse instead.

“An idol that likes anchovies and bean soup, eh.”

“What, what is it...! Is something wrong with that!?”

Kido mumbled that while looking down at the receipts in her hand with a pitiful

expression, and Kano followed suit.

“Really... it’s been hard on you huh... sorry for looking.”

“Let’s, let’s change the subject!! Ah!! Um, wow this snack looks pretty interesting!! The packaging looks nice as well so it must be delicious...”

Trying to find a way to change the subject, I snatched a snack packet off the table that Mary-chan hadn’t opened earlier.

That thing had the tagline “Especially thick seaweed gravy. A snack for real men!” on it.

“Uh, um... just take it...”

Kido seemed to falter slightly, while Kano sputtered and laughed suddenly.

Again, I felt like if there were a hole there, I would’ve buried myself inside and never come out.

“But, but bean soup is delicious... I like it as well...”

“Ma, Mary-chan...!”

Mary-chan hurriedly tried to play along with me.

“But there’s added carbonate in it.”

“That’s just disgusting, um...”

In the end it still achieved an adverse effect for being too direct, I guess. My emotional state once again fell into a slump.

“Fine then... I am a strange person anyway... that’s why I don’t have any friends, huh.”

A normal female high school student’s wallet, probably wouldn’t be filled with purchase receipts of dried fish snacks.

“Oi, don’t get too depressed! Get a hold of yourself...!”

“Especially thick seaweed gravy... my stomach hurts... ugh...”

“How long are you planning to laugh!? Ah...! Sorry?”

After I yelled angrily at Kano who was laughing while clutching his stomach, Mary-chan had a shock, and her shoulders began shaking with a scared

expression appearing on her face.

“Ah, really sorry about that. I thought I would’ve died. Anyway let’s just cut the crap for now, shouldn’t we be heading out?”

“Eh? Heading out... where?”

Kano stood up and stretched energetically.

“If we don’t handle your cellphone for now we’d be in deep trouble right? There’s a phone retailer nearby you know.”

“Yeah, there is.”

Kido flipped noisily through a phonebook placed on a magazine stand located opposite from the sofa, and answered lazily. “E, even if you’re saying this now, but switching phones won’t have much use right...?”

“Yeah, but we can at least transfer your contacts right? Anyway we should ask about there.”

“Um, no, but... if I go out...”

Now, if I headed out it would definitely be much worse.

If I once again attracted a huge crowd, I wouldn’t be able to escape.

“Ah, we’ll follow as well so there won’t be any problem. Right, Kido?”

“...I guess.”

Kano laughed cheerily upon observing my confused expression.

“Kido’s ‘ability’ is exactly as you saw just now, but that was only a part of it.”

He intentionally spread his arms wide, and continued.

“I’ll cut to the chase, the range of Kido’s ability isn’t just ‘herself’, as she can manipulate ‘anything around her’ as well. I call this the ‘Mekakushi’ (Blindfold) ability. Which means –“

“Even, even I can appear invisible!?”

I unconsciously increased my speaking volume due to overexcitement.

“It’s not making you invisible but actually making your presence less obvious to an unlimited extent. Kisarag-chan, you’ve never felt like this haven’t you? Not

blindly attracting attention to yourself but instead having the knowledge of attracting others from your 'actions' and 'words' –“ A few images flashed through my head. The drawings I drew in primary school were the same thing.

“Which is to say, your ability to 'attract attention' can be used on other things as well. Well, despite that now you attract the attention of others no matter what you do. Anyway, Kido's ability can completely nullify that, so just relax. Even though it was Kido that got the wrong person initially, but who knows? It could be fate that brought you here as well.”

Kido embarrassedly shielded her face with a magazine.

“Eh, what do you mean the wrong person? What happened?”

Mary-chan asked Kano with a confused expression on her face, while Kano's smile once again turned unspeakably sinister.

I had the feeling that this guy really loved teasing others.

“Oh, so this is how it happened. Well she did bully Mary pretty hard but Kido actually –“

“Um, let's go then! Ah, Mary don't pay attention to that. Nothing happened.”

As Kido said that she threw the magazine onto the couch, and hurriedly stood up.

“We're going out...?”

“Uh, to the nearby phone store.”

Apparently unused to having Mary-chan start a conversation with him, Kano replied as though he had a shock.

Probably because Kido was unrelentingly releasing an aura that seemed to say “Don't say anything”. This moment perfectly captured the hierarchy within the Dan.

“...Will we be passing by the park?”

“Hmm? Yes we definitely will be passing by. Is there something you need to do?”

“Then I'll follow... I need to bury something...”

As Kano was staring into space, Mary-chan had stood up and was walking towards the kitchen.

“...Burying would be referring to... did your pet die or something? Mary-chan.”

“No, I don’t know anything about a dead pet. Speaking of which she never had one in the first place.”

“I thought so. And Mary-chan wouldn’t be able to afford the pet food, so you probably wouldn’t be keeping one behind our backs...”

“So what is it...?”

As the two of them were busy discussing what Mary-chan said about ‘burying something’, we suddenly heard cracking noises coming from the kitchen. Mary-chan was sweeping up the broken teacup splinters from when she was making tea earlier into a paper bag.

“Ah...”

I remembered that Mary-chan had let me use one of her favorite cups. She had clearly put a lot of effort into it, but in the end she had fell and broke them.

As Mary-chan scooped up the broken pieces of teacup with animal patterns on them, she looked like she was about to cry again. “Ah... so that was what she wanted to bury huh.”

“So Mary really did treasure that thing.”

She was carefully extracting the broken pieces from the convenience store bag and putting them into a cloth bag decorated with beautiful-looking patterns, which appeared to take a lot of time and effort.

Compared to homework, it appeared to be a process that required much more concentration and effort.

“...Commander, can I talk to you about something?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“It’s no problem even if the phone store isn’t nearby right? Like a shopping center that has counters selling phones...”

Kido momentarily looked confusedly at me like a question mark “?”, after

which she appeared to understand what I was getting at, and her expression immediately softened.

“Since we’re going out, it doesn’t matter where we go. Just pick somewhere you like.”

“Thank, thank you!”

Kano had a simple smile on his face as well.

“Isn’t this great? Mary’s never been to a shopping center before so she’d be overjoyed. Also Kido will be going as well so we won’t have anything to worry about, right?”

“We still have to ask Mary. Go get her.”

Being pushed lightly from behind by Kido, I walked towards the kitchen.

Looking closely Mary appeared to have kept away all the bigger shards of glass, and was contemplating on how she should deal with the smaller pieces.

If the pieces were too small, it would definitely be dangerous if she were to use her hands.

“Can I help you?”

Talking to her from the side, Mary-chan turned around, shocked.

“Eh...?”

“The small pieces are very dangerous you know? I’ll help you pour them out from the bag, OK?”

“Uh, okay...”

As she said this, Mary-chan passed the paper bag over to me.

Inside the bag were lots of glass shards that made up four teacups.

She probably planned to bury all the pieces except for those from the teacups she liked.

“Those teacups were very precious to you huh?”

“Yeah... my mother gave them to me.”

I froze suddenly. From the way that Kano and Kido were always worrying about

her, I hadn't realized that Mary-chan might've had parents. Although I didn't know whether or not it was only a temporary situation, or whether they weren't coming back anymore, I couldn't detect the presence of Mary-chan's parents.

- Memories that I hated but I could never forget resurfaced, and made my chest tighten slightly.

"So that's how it is..."

"But it's fine. I'll always remember them..."

I was worried that she might start crying again, but instead a gentle smile blossomed on Mary-chan's face.

That expression made me feel like crying instead.

But, even Mary-chan wasn't crying, so I couldn't let her see me being depressed here.

"Oh... So if Mary-chan wants to, could you follow me shopping later?"

I determinedly uttered the idea I had just thought of.

"Shopping...? Cellphone...?"

"Yeah, if Mary-chan want's to... how about we go buy a tea set for everyone as well?"

Before I had finished my sentence, Mary-chan had already turned around and faced me.

"One, one set!? Can I select it with you...?"

"Of course! You see, if everyone were to use the same tea set to drink tea it would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Maybe because she was happy with my suggestion, Mary-chan instantly appeared cheerful.

"...I want to go...!"

"Really!? That's great... so let's go!"

"Ok...! But where exactly are we going...?"

"Today, we're going to the shopping center! It's a place where all sorts of

stores are! If we all go together it'll be very fun, you know?"

"Shopping center...!?"

Mary-chan's face appeared to glow with anticipation.

I didn't expect her to be this happy...!

Well I did think that today was a disastrous day earlier or something, but in reality it was an unbelievably fun occasion.

Going to the shopping center to buy things... even I couldn't resist the cheers within my heart.

"I, I'll go get ready...!"

Placing the bag carefully on the kitchen counter, Mary-chan trotted in the direction of her room.

Watching her cheery footsteps I began feeling truly happy for her, and naturally smiled.

Ah... but if she wasn't careful she'd fall down again... "So, you accepted Kisaragi-chan's invitation?"

"Um, yeah... I'll go get ready!"

Mary who had replied to Kano's question had an expression of uncontrollable joy on her face.

- Until Kano said something he shouldn't have.

"That's great! Ah, you're going to wear that pair of socks aren't you? ...Pfft... Heh...!"

As if he remembered something, Kano suddenly attempted to hold in his laughter.

Socks...?

Probably something mentioned earlier, about Mary-chan's socks being very funny.

Well, Mary-chan was currently barefooted...

As I was in the midst of my thoughts, her smile stopped short unnaturally.

At that time, as though only the time around him had stopped, Kano suddenly stopped moving.

Kido had an expression that said “This is bad”,

“Ka, Kano...? What is it...” as I was about to approach him, I noticed Mary-chan’s expression first instead.

Her aura was completely different from just now, and she bent her head down, releasing a killing intent.

The two ends of her hair that billowed down from her shoulders began moving about, as though they were living things. From the gaps between her hair I saw her ‘eyes’ that were clearly not pink anymore... red, they had turned red.

“Waah!!”

Reacting to this sudden change in the situation, the pitch of my voice rose drastically.

Because the girl that had been so polite from just now, was now releasing a killer vibe and shaking her hair about.

“Sigh... is he an idiot or something...?”

Although Kido was knocking on Kano’s head repeatedly, he continued to remain motionless.

His expression didn’t budge as well, making him look like a human-sized mannequin.

“What, what’s going on...?”

“Ah, Mary here, can turn whoever she ‘locks eyes on’ into stone.”

“S, stone!?”

Despite the fact that Kido was once again knocking on Kano’s head while explaining to me, but I couldn’t understand her at all as there entire affair was too strange.

Turning people into stone, compared to the ability of ‘attracting attention’ was in another dimension entirely.

It was almost like magic. Mary-chan was still breathing heavily while glaring at

Kano.

“What is that... speaking of which will Kano be fine!?”

Although it wasn't very nice to say so, Kano's frozen expression that seemed to say 'it's too funny I can't help but laugh' was rather funny.

“No, if this happens it's too late... he can't ever return back to normal.”

“...Eh?”

“It's sad but... OK! Let's use him as a decoration for maybe a coat hanger or something! But honestly we don't need it...”

Kido said that expressionlessly.

Kano... we had to say goodbye like this even though we'd just met...

Ah, but no one would need a coat hanger shaped like this...

“Anyway it's in the way so let's dump it in the city dump first... Grunt... Mary-chan help me get that end, will you?”

“Mm... this sort of thing must be quickly thrown away...”

“-Huh!? What are you doing why is Kido suddenly grabbing me from behind what is this AAAHHH!!”

As the two were about to shift him out of the room, Kano suddenly moved.

Kido didn't waste any time in shoving a knee into his spine. Even though I had kind of guessed from Kido's tone that Kano should be able to return to normal, but this was the real killer, wasn't it? Kano fell onto the floor groaning.

“Are you stupid!? I've already said that we're going out so don't do anything unnecessary!”

“Commander, sor-ry...”

Kano was still lying on the floor, but as he answered he was smiling as usual.

“OK, Mary you go get ready first. If you don't hurry up the stores will close, you know.”

“Eh!? Ah... I'll go get ready immediately...!”

Mary-chan scampered back to her own room.

Kido's shoulders sagged in a manner that seemed to say 'What can we do with her'.

"Uh... Ma, Mary-chan she... what?"

"We aren't very sure either... that fellow seems to be a descendant of Medusa."

"Me, Medusa!? That... the one that turns people into stone... right!?"

"Mm. I had my suspicions initially as well, but she really isn't human."

Being given an unbelievably strange answer, I stared blankly back at Kido.

I had heard of Medusa, of course.

Well I had, but it was merely limited to the commonplace knowledge that she was 'a monster that could turn people into stone and had snakes growing out of her head'.

That Medusa was right in front of my eyes, and I had actually saw her using her ability.

"Apparently her parents had told her that they were Medusas (Medusae?) since she was born, and her mother allegedly could turn people into actual stone, but the extent of Mary's ability is merely to stop people in time."

"But, that's... so supernatural..."

"Yeah, I understand how you're feeling, anyway Mary does exist in this world. So do I and so do you. And so do things that are exactly like her. Let's not talk about science for now, the fact that strange abilities do exist in this world, you know all too well about it right?"

"Yes, that's true..."

"- Would you hate her?"

"...Eh?"

"Since you know that she isn't human, would you because of this, become to hate her?"

"...How is that possible? I want to be friends with her...!"

“...Then, just keep it that way. If we get the chance we’ll tell you everything about us. If you will, tell us about you as well.”

“Um, OK...!”

“I, I’m ready...”

Mary-chan had opened her room door and was stretching her head out.

But she appeared to be embarrassed and was unwilling to step out.

“What are you doing? Once you’re ready we’re leaving.”

“Oh, OK.”

Mary-chan who pushed open the door and walked out didn’t have anything strange about her.

The socks that caused her to be laughed at so badly just now, was merely a normal pair of pure white ankle-length socks.

“Eh? Those socks, is there anything strange about it?”

“Ah, those are perfectly normal. But, just now she was wearing loose socks.”
(TL note: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loose_socks) “Loose, loose sucks...!?”

Imagining her current clothing in combination with bubble socks, it was really pretty strange.

At this time Mary-chan red-facedly questioned Kido.

“Why, why did you have to tell her!? Even when I wore a perfectly normal pair this time...!”

“Hmm? Sorry, I was asked so it just slipped out. There’s no problem, right?”

“B, but...!”

Mary-chan stared at me with a glint in her eyes. She was probably pretty hurt for being treated like an idiot.

But why loose socks...?

“Kano’s... this is?”

Taking over the magazine Kano was looking at, I noticed the words “Special edition! Super-vintage girl’s fashion collection” printed on the top, and a long

queue of female models wearing rather modern clothes.

“...Be, because it was pretty so... I...”

The fashion sense of the modern Medusa is pretty good after all.

“I did try my best sewing it after all...”

And they were home-made as well.

Navigating the alleyways, the main roads were still extremely noisy.

The restaurant on the opposite side of the road, was packed with customers that had probably brought their own families.

Unexpectedly returning here after causing such a large commotion, the situation was completely different from just now.

I didn't disguise myself, nor did I attempt to hide myself, but there wasn't even a crowd gathering, not even anyone called my name. The passers-by on the streets didn't notice us at all, but instead merely looked directly forward while hurriedly rushing past us.

“This, just feels... a rather new sensation...”

“There's no use even if you tell me that. Speaking of which, how long is Kano planning to not notice us?”

Kano who was walking slightly ahead of us, turned around and looked in my direction.

As though searching for some small detail, he surveyed everything intently, then walked back towards us with a satisfied expression on his face.

“Yep, absolutely flawless. It took me a long time to find you even when I tried so hard.”

“You take too long.”

Kido sighed as though frustrated.

“Even if you say that there's nothing I can do, I couldn't see you anyway.”

Kano grumbled with that smile still on his face.

“Hah... you really couldn't see us huh...”

“Yeah, how should I put this? I probably could’ve seen you but I wouldn’t have noticed you. Experiencing it once again is rather irritating huh.”

According to what Kido had said, she really could eliminate the presence of everything in a radius of two meters around her. But it isn’t because we were invisible, so from our point of view nothing had changed.

“Huh...! I want to try...!”

“Are you stupid or something, if you come out the entire purpose of this whole thing would be nullified, wouldn’t it... And I say, Mary you’re too close! It’s too hot!”

Mary-chan’s hand was fearfully grabbing onto the underside of Kido’s jacket, which Kido promptly swatted away.

“There’s, so many people...”

“Isn’t this normal on a main road like this? Anyway everything’s normal, continue with the mission.”

“O, OK!”

For some reason hearing the words “Continue the mission”, made me feel like I was actually going on a mission to infiltrate or spy on something, which of course made me excited.

Well, even though it was just something normal like getting a new phone and teacups.

With Kido and Kano taking the lead, the main road we had reached was like another world entirely.

The scenery that lay in the 360 degrees around us, was exactly like a movie, moving along without impeding us.

The passers-by appeared to not notice us at all. It really felt like being invisible, which brought me a sense of comfort I hadn’t felt in my entire life.

But the amount of traffic on the furthestmost right lane was humongous, which made me slightly fearful. I was rather worried about Mary-chan so I looked at her, only to realize that her face had turned pale white. I could hear small whispers coming from her that I hadn’t noticed until now, small hints that said

“It’s fine... it’s fine...”

“Uh... Kano... um...”

“Eh? What is it? Why’re you speaking so softly?”

“Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean it...”

“It’s fine even if you speak normally you know? Even if you sing as well, like that single you released, what was it called again, peach-colored something or whatever...”

“Ah!! Why did you have to remind me of that!! You want me to hit you!?”

“Hit me!? ...Even if you do and create a loud noise in the process no one should notice right?”

“Argh, really... I didn’t want to talk to you about that! Mary-chan looks like she’s in bad shape...”

Mary-chan was still chanting something under her breath as though she was about to put a curse on someone.

If others could see it, some passers-by would definitely approach us to ask what’s going on.

“Ah... anyway I knew this would happen. Hey Mary? Oi. Hey, I don’t think she can do it.”

Kano began walking backwards and was waving his hand in Mary’s face. But she continued looking far ahead of us, and had absolutely no reaction.

But could this guy really walk backwards in this sort of situation?

Because everyone else couldn’t notice us, so we had to avoid them instead.

“Hey, stop for a while.”

As I was worrying about it, Kano suddenly stopped.

At the same time Kido halted her footsteps, and Mary-chan bumped into her back.

“Eh...?”

As I was about to ask “What happened?” some kid riding a bicycle appeared

from our left. If we had continued walking ahead like we had just now, we would've bumped into him.

But that place was, a blind spot that I wouldn't have noticed in my position.

"...! Oi, Mary!"

"Um... so, sorry..."

Mary immediately bent her head down and apologized as Kido turned around.

"But really, can't you pay more attention for once..."

"But it's so scary...! People everywhere..."

What I meant was you need to pay attention exactly because there are so many people around. Are you really an idiot?"

"I, I'm not an idiot...!" Mary-chan attempted to explain herself, but she couldn't help stuttering.

"Sigh... forget it. Let's go."

Kido began walking forward again, after which everyone started walking as well.

Mary-chan was definitely much calmer than she was before, but this time she began grumbling "Why would you say something like that..." which was clearly directed at Kido.

Kano walked as if nothing had happened.

"Kano, how did you find us just now?"

"Eh? Um, unconsciously?"

"Unconsciously... can you predict the future or something...?"

To be honest I wouldn't even be surprised if he said "That's true, actually?" but Kano merely changed the subject by saying "The future, huh~ it would be great if I could see it! Like my luck for the next day or something!"

Walking along the road, as we got closer to the shopping center, the amount of traffic increased as well.

The traffic heading in our direction from the shopping center itself was probably a lot as well, and as we looked over we saw a truck carrying what appeared to be a huge load of puppets.

“Mm, hey, we’re crossing the road. Don’t walk too far away from me.”

Kido stopped before the traffic light, and pointed towards a zebra crossing. There were cars turning right as well, so we had to cross especially carefully.

“R, roads are really scary after all...”

“Yeah. Everything’s fine. Just follow Kido.”

“But you’re still too close... get...off...”

“But...! But...!”

Mary-chan held onto Kido tightly, as though she was about to pull off a German suplex.

The more Kido struggled, the tighter she grabbed on.

I naturally went closer to Kido as well.

Observing the trucks passing before me, I felt a sudden pang of fear.

“Hmm, we can cross now.”

“Oh. Then let’s go. Keep close, OK?”

Watching the final two cars turn right after the traffic light turned green, Kano began walking.

Kido followed suit soon after.

I did reconfirm the situation on the road due to unease a few times, but since there were too many people, my instinct was to avoid them instead.

Getting through the zebra crossing without much trouble, I could see part of the shopping center from the gaps between the buildings.

Just one more road, and one more left turn then we would be there.

I had passed by this shopping center countless times, but each time I felt that it was absolutely massive.

Exactly like something that would appear in an RPG, I thought.

“This feels like something from an RPG don’t you think? That shopping center.”

While we were waiting for the crossing signal to turn green, Kano suddenly said that to me.

“Eh!? Eh!? What did you say!?”

“Um... why’re you so surprised? Did I say something that surprising...?”

I was considerably shocked by this coincidence, which made me produce a rather strange reaction.

Which of course attracted Kano’s attention.

It looked like a coincidence, but honestly speaking that guy felt like he could really read other people’s minds, which was rather creepy.

“Um... never mind, haha... nothing happened...”

“Hmm? You seem a bit off. Ah, did I coincidentally say the same thing you were thinking or something like that?”

“Huh! How, how did you know...?” Could this guy really read minds?

If that was the truth then all these suspicions I had until now would be... just thinking of this made chills run down my spine.

“Ah, did I guess correctly? Even though it was just a wild guess, turns out Kisaragi-chan and I really are compatible!”

“That’s, it’s disgusting so just stop talking.”

Honestly speaking my mind, Kano dejectedly sagged his shoulders, and appeared rather sad.

So it appeared my mind hadn’t been read after all. “Kido... so the only person that can understand me is really only you huh, Kido...”

“Don’t get close to me. I’ll kill you.”

“O~K...”

Kano tried to get close to Kido, but was repelled by her killing intent.

That’s the Commander for you.

After the traffic light turned green we once again crossed the road, getting

closer to the shopping center.

Kano and I walked against the oncoming traffic, and a huge shipping truck passed us by.

I briefly wondered how the drama series filming would be going now...

The agent would probably still be angry. There was also a possibility that everyone in the agency was already looking for me.

I needed to get in contact with them, have a good discussion, and properly convey my thoughts.

“Is, is everything alright...?”

“Eh?”

Turning towards the direction where the sound was coming from, Mary-chan’s worried expression stared back at me.

“Ah, yeah! Everything’s fine! Um... did I look very poorly earlier...?”

Mary-chan nodded her head, not bothering to gloss over the situation.

Yeah, I finally made some friends.

I met some kids who would worry about the normal me, and not just because I was an idol.

“I, I’m sorry... ah, we can see the shopping center from here Mary-chan!? There’s going to be so much interesting things... I’m looking forward to it!”

“Eh...? Wow... it’s true! Like a castle in my storybooks!”

There was a break in the line of buildings on the right, after which the image of the shopping center that had eluded us for so long appeared before us.

With a luxurious exterior that made Mary-chan nod her head in approval, like the castle she mentioned earlier.

I had been intending to visit the amusement park on the roof of the shopping center for a long while now, but I was always alone so I never got to.

But today I was with everyone else, so I may get the chance to visit after all.

I felt the cheers coming from within my heart growing louder.

“Right!? It’s even better inside you know?”

“Yeah! I can’t wait to go in!”

Mary-chan’s eyes lit up like a little kid’s.

Unconsciously looking over at Kido, I realized that she was smiling a bit as well.

I figured my eyes must be glittering as well, which made me somewhat embarrassed.

I walked closer to Kido, and spoke softly.

“Commander, how about you come buy some stuff as well?”

“Hmm? There’s no need, I don’t have anything to buy...”

“Eh~ since you don’t get the chance to go out a lot how about you go look at some clothes or something? I’ll help you pick some cute ones!”

“You choose...!? No thanks, forget it...”

“You don’t need to be so polite with me you know? Despite the fact that I’m like this I have confidence in my taste of clothing...” “No thanks, isn’t that your personal clothing? It’s too flashy so it doesn’t really appeal to me... Hey, what’s wrong?”

We were right at the entrance of the shopping center.

The thing that was right in front of my eyes but I hadn’t noticed until now, was someone I had gotten used to looking at.

Nonsense. This was impossible. Why here, and why now...!

I figured that he probably wouldn’t have been told everything, but he needed to leave here and now.

“- Kisaragi? What’s up?”

“Onii-chan...”

“Huh...? Onii-chan? Wait a minute... ugh!?”

I attempted to run away but I tripped over myself instead, and crashed into Kido.

Kido lost her balance, and in turn bumped into my brother who was standing

there.

“...!!”

We were finished. I was too shaken up, which made the situation even worse instead.

“Ah, ah!!”

Mary-chan appeared to be shocked by this turn of events as well, falling to the floor as well seemingly for no particular reason. Kido immediately stood up and got her bearings, turning her back towards my brother.

“Uh... really sorry about that! Um... that... that...”

From my brother’s mouth, out came a voice that was incurably useless.

He bowed down deeply, which shocked everyone there at the time.

Please just spare me... I immediately regretted my decision of accidentally calling him “Onii-chan” earlier, and my sigh was swept away with the wind.

“...It’s fine. I’m sorry.”

Kido said that and returned to us.

My brother looked up and surveyed his surroundings, then placed his hands on his knees while breathing deeply.

What exactly is this useless life form.

Even though he had merely bumped into some girl, he panicked as though he had stumbled into a wild bear.

Luckily he didn’t appear to have noticed me, which was probably due to Kido-san’s ability working its charm on us.

No, it might be because my brother’s eyes had rotted away already.

No matter the reason, I used my hands to shield my face at this sudden turn of events.

“Really... this is the worst...”

“Hey, hey what’s going on Kisaragi! That guy is your brother!?”

Returning to us, Kido asked the question rather calmly right in front of my

brother while releasing a cold sweat.

“Uh... no, no... please stop talking... it’s not like that...”

“No, just now Kisaragi-chan clearly said “Onii-chan” really loudly,”

Even Kano that was blandly observing the situation, couldn’t resist the urge to comment.

Mary-chan had stood up already, and the knee area of her socks appeared to have suffered some damage.

“Wah...! Are, are you injured!?”

“Yeah, and it’s my first time wearing it...”

Mary-chan appeared to be only paying attention to her socks.

She didn’t appear to be physically hurt.

“That’s great... speaking of which Kano why’re you laughing! It’s disgusting!”

“Eh? It’s nothing... don’t pay attention to me then?”

Kano had an expression on his face like he just discovered a new toy.

It was unbelievably disgusting.

“Waaaaaaaah! This is terrible!! It’s so terrible that it can’t get any worse!! Why did this have to happen here...”

“Hey, hey was that really your brother? Yours?”

“Commander, stop being annoying! Stop talking about it already!! This is the worst...”

“Um, oh...! Sorry...”

Looking back at my brother, he was standing at the entrance while talking into his phone.

He was probably talking to that kid.

But why would he be in a place like this?

He clearly hadn’t stepped out of his place in two years.

“Fine let’s go! OK!? Mary-chan!”

“Uh, um... Kisaragi? ...Are you angry?”

“Absolutely nothing of the sort!! Come on already, Commander!”

“Oh, OK...”

We should take advantage of my brother’s quick stop to enter the building as fast as possible.

I pushed Kido through the doors, and dashed in the direction of the shopping center.

“Eh? What about me?”

Kano walked beside us while pointing at himself, looking at me while smiling.

“Kano you can go back and sleep!”

“Eh~ ...I’ll go find your brother to play with then...”

“Ah!! I was just joking!! Please come with us!!”

“Well, if Kisaragi-chan wanted me to come you should have just said so~!”

Pushing down the killing intent rising up from within, I silently walked towards the shopping center.

Anyway on the seventh floor, there should be a phone counter in the household appliances section.

Although my brother probably came here for a reason, but since it was such a large place, so our destinations couldn’t possibly be the same.

No matter what we had to leave immediately.

Let’s quickly go in. Finally I’d have the chance to go shopping!

From the windows of the shopping center the afternoon sunlight burst into the building.

It was the festival period so there were a lot of customers bringing kids with them, and the kids in question were opening and closing the refrigerators on display for fun.

If I could I would do just that. But, reality is cruel. It’s like I had something that brought bad luck clinging onto me.

“Ki, Kisaragi...?”

“Hmm? What’s wrong Mary-chan?”

“Eh... that, regarding that... pull yourself together...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m always spirited you know? So happy... phew...”

“Oh, um... yeah... sorry...”

Shopping center, seventh floor.

In here, the speakers in the household appliances section were blasting some BGM with a fast-paced tempo. (TL note: BGM: Background music. In case you didn’t know that already.) Kano yawned loudly, which made me feel more tired than I was before.

That was hardly a surprise. I didn’t know how long I had to wait.

Despite that I was planning to go up to the seventh floor immediately after I entered the shopping center, both the elevators and the escalators were packed with people, as we were afraid of cancelling out Kido’s ability, we ended up taking the stairs. It’s not as if our bodies themselves had disappeared, so only one touch was needed to reveal our presence But Mary-chan would begin breathing heavily upon climbing two flights of stairs, after which we would stop for a brief rest, which of course wasted quite a bit of our time.

We had finally reached the seventh floor and were heading towards the phone counter, but then my brother walked out of the elevator.

Let’s just scratch that thought of today being a good day. Today really was an unbelievably disastrous day.

With my brother that had not been outside for two years, we were actually headed for the same place, what a romantic situation. If some deity of romance had appeared at that moment, I would’ve punched him hard in the face.

But my brother was a different matter entirely.

He was after all a family member that I’ve spent a lot of time with, so my presence would probably be more obvious to him which would of course increase our chances of being spotted.

I did feel that my clumsy old brother couldn't possibly notice us, but just in case I wanted to scout out the situation before he went back, Due to those various reasons, we were waiting for my brother who was making suspicious actions in front of a grenade-shaped kettle that had no preorders whatsoever to log out.

"Why did it have to turn out like this...?"

As the four of us were standing in a row at a corridor with very little passers-by, I mumbled to myself.

The members of the Mekakushi Dan that had came here to buy a new phone, were now carrying out the simple and gigantic yet hellish mission of avoiding the customers that would occasionally pass us by.

"After all you have that don't you? How should I put it? Unfortunate ability."

"Yep... that's how it is... I myself just realized it today..."

"So, what's your brother coming to buy?"

"I have no idea myself... anyway, probably some PC appliance. Why would he come here himself to get it though...?"

"Um~ probably because of that? It's the festival period now so I don't think goods can be delivered online."

"Ah... that's definitely the reason... but still why now..."

"Well probably because Onii-chan is so similar to Kisaragi-chan, so your wavelengths are just about the same frequency huh?"

"... You really want me to punch you?"

"Ah, maybe not. I could be wrong."

"Sigh... sorry Mary-chan... I'll make it up to you..."

"Um... it was my fault in the first place...and I'm very happy so it's fine."

"Ugh... stop it! How long is he going to stand around!? Just get your stuff and go back..."

"Well it's only been about fifteen minutes? Just wait and it'll be fine."

“I wanted to contact the agency earlier, and go out to buy things with Mary-chan...~”

“Um... I’m looking forward to that as well. But anyway we’re almost at that stage so it’s fine, OK?” “Whoa! Mary-chan you’re just too sweet!! Let’s go eat dessert together later? OK?”

“Mm...! Ah, someone’s coming.”

Mary-chan shifted to the side, as there was a customer coming through with a gigantic mountain-climbing bag.

But what exactly was that customer coming to do, he didn’t appear as if he was coming to buy anything, and instead he set his bag down and began inspecting the items inside.

“Jeez. Isn’t this guy going to move...?”

Looking to the side, I saw Kano’s expression noticeably change.

As if noticing that change Kido’s gaze suddenly appeared sharper.

“Kido, this is bad.”

“Ah. Kisaragi, Mary, we’re going to head out this way.”

“Eh...? What...?”

Even though we had left the corridor just in time as we predicted, their expressions remained serious.

“What should we do? Retreat for now?”

“Go get Kisaragi’s brother for now. Don’t scare him though.”

“Understood. These two will be with you for now then.” “No problem, just go now.”

After Kido-san finished, Kano disappeared into the corridor my brother had just went into.

“Wait, wait a minute Commander? Why are you bringing my brother...? And if we leave now my phone...”

“The fellow just now, there was an unnatural smell of gunpowder coming from

his bag. It might be some sort of firearm. I saw a small section of the body of the gun, and there appears to be explosives as well.”

“Eh?”

“...! This is bad...! The people crossing through the other corridor just now were with them as well...? Hey, we’re leaving immediately after Kano gets back!”

“W, what...? What’s going on Kido...?”

Mary began to panic upon seeing Kido’s sudden change in attitude.

Although I still didn’t understand the situation I still felt rather fearful, and the surrounding atmosphere immediately filled with tension.

My brain couldn’t catch up, but the scene before me was burned into my eyes in an unbelievably memorable and clear fashion.

“Commander... that... there...!”

“Dammit... anyway just listen here first. This place might already be...”

Suddenly a “Boom -!” rang throughout the area.

As though the explosion was a signal, alarms immediately began sounding throughout the floor.

“Eek...!”

Mary-chan held onto me in shock.

The sound of the alarm became increasingly louder, until it spread throughout the entire floor.

The man that had passed by our group earlier took off his coat and threw it on the floor, revealing a get-up not unlike a Special Forces soldier, then removed the gun from his mountain-climbing bag.

“Dammit... we were too late...!? Hey!!”

As I was still frozen in place due to the sudden change in the situation, Kido suddenly grabbed me and Mary-chan’s wrists, and dragged us into the central area of the floor.

We dived onto the floor, and metal sliding boards immediately slid down at the

position we were standing earlier. The scenery near the elevator that we were able to see since earlier was completely sealed off.

“Hey! You guys all right?”

“Yeah, you could say that...! Mary-chan are you all right!?”

Being hugged by Kido, Mary-chan began shivering violently.

We were ordered by Kido to enter another smaller corridor, where the three of us sat together in a circle.

“Mary calm down, it’s fine. They won’t notice us. It’s just that...”

From all around us came repeatedly sounding alarms. The sounds of people running all around the place echoed around the floor.

“This is bad... those people are probably terrorists. They’re seasoned, and they planned this out well. Probably planning to take everyone on the floor as hostages...

Goosebumps rose on my skin.

Since earlier my brother was on this floor.

Which means now...

“Onii-chan!!”

“Wait up!! Kano’s already there. If you go out now, you’ll be caught!!”

“But...!!”

Imagining the worst possible consequences, my tears began flowing uncontrollably.

Even if my brother was like that, he was still my one and only Onii-chan.

It doesn’t matter if he’s a hikikomori, it doesn’t matter if he’s a NEET, and it doesn’t matter if he’s somewhat rude, but he’s still an important member of the family to me!

Why did it have to turn out like this?

I finally got the chance to cure myself of this ability and all...

I finally got the chance to make some new friends... I wonder, is this

punishment for me bringing too much trouble for others?

If that was true then the fact that everyone was in this situation, would be my fault as well.

“Kisaragi! Just calm down first. Hostages won’t be killed immediately, you know. Anyway we don’t know how bad exactly the situation is now, so wouldn’t it be useless if you just rush in recklessly?”

“Yeah... I’m... sorry...”

My tears continued to flow despite my endless efforts to brush them away.

The second time I was crying today, felt completely different due to the happiness I had felt earlier.

After a brief silence, chaotic noises could be heard from the other side of the moving shutters.

It appeared to be the police, but they weren’t able to anything due to the shutters.

“Ugh...!”

“Argh...!”

Kido moved unexpectedly, which caused Mary-chan to receive such a shock that she jumped slightly.

The reason was, Kido’s phone had begun to ring.

“A text message...!?”

Kido pulled out her phone with a panicked expression on her face.

Which instantly turned into an expression of shock and disbelief.

Mary and I stared confusingly at her expression which was in stark contrast with the current situation.

“Um, regarding that... who sent it?”

“...That idiot...”

Kido threw the phone over to me.

Text was displayed across the screen, and it appeared to be sent by Kano.

“Subject: We got caught~!

Body: How are you doing over there? Everything’s fine here so far. We’re being lined up together with everyone! Being a hostage for the first time in my life! Ah! Kisaragi-chan’s brother was caught as well~ he’s right beside me! So we took a photo as a souvenir (Photo attached), that’s how it is so please tell us what’s going on there.”

After reading the text, I opened the attached image, which depicted my brother who had his hands tied and Kano who was making a victory sign behind him, also various other uneasy hostages were in the photo as well.

It was a photo taken with the highest quality, and the photographer’s hand didn’t appear to shake at all.

“Commander... does this guy have something wrong with his brain...?”

“Yeah, he’s incurable...”

“Hey, hey Kido... is Kano not in danger...?” “No, he’s still in a considerable amount of danger. His brain that is. We should get him to the hospital to dissect that thing sometime.”

“...Speaking of which how did this guy manage to type despite being caught?”

“Oh, that’s true...! Everyone around him is visibly tied up, but only Kano appears to be making a victory sign.”

“Because this guy’s just too dumb, so I guess the terrorists decided that they could just leave him untied.”

“ ... ”

The silence between the three of us disappeared. Where did that serious atmosphere from just now disappear off too?

For some reason, I felt like we were starring in some well-planned comedy.

“Commander... um...”

“Anyway the situation still looks pretty unchanged... I think...”

“Kano looks pretty happy~”

Looking at the photo that seemed to have an ‘emotionally charged graduation

trip commemoration photo' feel about it, I let out a sigh.

What exactly is this situation?

"But is he really untied? Even if he is an idiot they'd still tie him up right?"

"From his surroundings Kano should look like someone who's been tied up and looks horrified."

"Ah, is Kano still playing his dress-up game again?"

"Eh...? What's going on here..."

"To put it simply, that guy's ability is 'Deceiving Eyes'. If my ability is to let others 'see through', then his should be to let others 'see something else'."

"And... that means...?"

"Anyway it's like bringing a cute kitten home to realize it's actually a huge dog, something like that."

"Wow. Kido's example is pretty cute~"

As Mary finished her sentence while giggling, Kido's face turned red in embarrassment, which was of course a rare sight.

"Ah, no, stop messing around. I, it's not like I'm interested in animals or anything..."

"So it's basically an ability that works something like a visual trap...?"

"Yeah something like that. But that guy's ability range is very small, so it only works on himself."

"Eh?"

"It was the same way on the way to the shopping center, he didn't give you the chance to see it but he was always looking left and right in order to observe the surroundings. That's how we spotted the bicycle."

"Ah..." When he appeared to be walking backwards, he was probably surveying the situation in reality.

So as to not let us worry...?

"...But despite that..."

“Ah... anyway that guy’s just an idiot...”

The boy in the photo was making a victory sign with an unbelievably large and cheerful smile on his face, which accented his moronic look instead.

But due to Kano, Mary –chan had stopped crying, and I had got the chance to calm down.

This person could be really strong.

Although, I was still very worried about my idiot brother.

Bumping into something like this on a rare occasion of coming out, would he become an even worse shut-in?

Thinking of this while looking at the photo, I suddenly had an idea.

It was a brief one, but more ideas began hopping out of the top of my head endlessly, and I formed a somewhat hazy “action plan”.

“Ah... ah...!!”

“Hmm? What? What is it?”

“Commander, you’re the ‘blindfold’, and I’m...” “Huh? What’re you talking about?”

It felt somewhat awkward to continue despite being scolded like that.

But the action plan I had thought up just now, could possibly help us get out of the current situation.

“Commander. Maybe, we can defeat... defeat these people.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Um... um it’s hard to put it in words... I need to put it down on paper or something while I work it out, could you lend me your phone for a second?”

“Hmm? OK...”

“Anyway...”

As I was using Kido’s phone to type in my thoughts, a man’s voice boomed out of the speakers throughout the floor. That was probably the leader of the terrorists or something.

“Ten billion as ransom... the terrorist are pretty dumb as well.”

“It just feels that ten billion is slightly ridiculous. Something like ‘a large amount of money a kid would fantasize about’.”

Maybe because we had just seen an abnormal idiot, even the terrorists began to seem like idiots.

“How much is ten billion?”

“Let’s say you make two fake flowers a day, ten billion would be what you’d earn in a billion days.”

“...Eh? How long’s that?”

“Sigh, just forget it...”

I was for the most part listening to the man’s demands, but my current goal was to finalize the action plan.

I used the space for the reply to Kano’s message to type in the words.

“Uh, um, please wait... we’ll do this that way...”

“It’s fine... do you really have a way?”

“Yeah, something like that... ah, what? Uh-um...”

Typing halfway, I realized I forgot how the plan would end.

In this situation many might be hurt or killed. If we don’t avoid that...

“Ah, this is bad... so you really can’t get it...?”

“Huh!? What’s going on!?”

“Eh... just please wait some more... um....”

“Hey, what are you talking about...?”

Mary-chan who was listening by the side suddenly turned to look at us.

As I was talking to Kido I didn’t notice that Mary-chan had calmed down significantly.

“Ah, about that... we’re making up an action plan...”

“Eh, an action plan!? Sounds so cool...!”

“Ah~ Mary you shut up first. Even if you joined in you wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

“Aww~...”

“Eh? But... because I ‘attract attention’ and Mary-chan ‘meets their eyes’ –“

“Hmm? Did you say something...? Kisaragi?”

“... I’ve got it! ...This can work! This will work! It’s done!!”

Passing over the phone over to Kido, Mary-chan began reading the plan as well.

“Mm-hmm, huh!? Who’s this fellow that appears halfway!!”

“Ah, that’s the kid that I knew... um it’s just as written there...”

“That sort of thing really...?”

“No, no problem... probably, yes... I’m sure of it. Any, anyway let’s just confirm this with Kano first!”

“Wow... my name’s at the end too...!”

“Anyway can I just send it like this...!?” “...Well if that sort of person really exists... then yeah...”

“Eh...?”

As I was wondering what Kido was mumbling about, she looked up at me.

“- No, let’s say if that person really exists, it’s a pretty decent plan. This might even be our only option. ...Well done, newbie.”

“...Yes! Thank You I, I’m sending it now...!”

I was extremely happy.

This compliment that I’ve just received, might just be the one that’s made me the happiest compared to all the previous ones.

It’s great that I joined the Mekakushi Dan.

“Hey... I don’t understand at all...”

“Ah, Mary-chan just... um... I, I’ll give you the signal! So before that just work

with me? OK?”

“...? Yeah! I get it! I, I’ll do my best!”

Mary-chan clasped her hands together, looking somewhat emotional.

The truth is that if Mary and I couldn’t cooperate properly the whole plan would be jeopardized, but I guess I would have to figure out something on the fly.

I was still rather uneasy, but I believed it would work. ...Now we just had to ensure that! Kido’s phone received yet another message.

Even though I had just sent it... but it was from Kano as expected.

“Subject: Seems interesting!

Body: Kisaragi-chan’s plan seems like a lot of fun! The kid that Kisaragi-chan mentioned earlier is probably here too you know! I was hearing someone talking since just now, she sounds like a nice little kid! So anyway I’ll try and confirm it, could you guys come closer to us without being detected? Also I took another photo, since I was bored –“

I read up to that point, then selected the ‘Yes’ option to the question ‘Do you want to delete this message?’ without even opening the photo.

“Yep, looks like there’s no problem!

“Huh, really.”

It appears that Kano’s stupidity was picked up by Kido.

“Getting there unnoticed or something, is it a problem?”

“As long as we don’t bump into anyone. But whatever you do don’t get careless, remember that they’re packing heat.” (TL note: Packing heat: Carrying lethal weapons/firearms) “OK!”

The mission finally started. The three of us began walking down the corridor.

Looking into the central area of the floor, all the hostages were gathered in front of a wall.

“It looks like they’re really taking hostages... for some reason it feels much more realistic now.”

“Same here. Hey Mary, don’t walk off anywhere, OK?”

“Mm!”

Mary-chan was clearly afraid of large crowds, but facing gun-toting terrorists, she didn’t look at all different from how she is normally. I suppose that would make her pretty amazing on that front.

Well, I was pretty nervous as well, but for some reason I wasn’t all that scared facing the terrorists as well.

We had reached the end of the corridor, and I spotted Kano and my brother sitting in a corner.

“...Does that idiot not care about his personal safety at all? At least hide yourself...”

“...My brother does look pretty driven though... That guy’s really cowardly, so since he looks so confident about himself, that person’s probably here.”

“You guys really are pretty similar as siblings huh... anyway Mary... what are you doing?”

“Eh, this feels pretty cool...”

Mary was holding some sort of electronic massager she got from god-knows-where.

From her expression, it was clear that she intended to use it as some kind of weapon.

“...Forget it... just put it back after you’re done...”

“OK! I’ll put it back after this.” “Heheh... anyway let’s just get inside through that corridor over there.”

Turning into a slightly narrower corridor compared to the previous one, I saw some guy with a messy stubble sitting in front of one of the shutters who appeared to be the leader. From the way he was playing with his phone in a relaxed manner, it appeared that everything was going as he’d planned.

“The ringleader must be that guy over there right? He just has that bad-guy look on his face...”

“It must be him. He just looks rotten to the bone.”

“W, what a scary-looking face...”

That guy definitely wouldn’t suspect that he would be looked down for his appearance in a place like this.

But he was definitely a dastardly criminal.

Even that messy stubble seemed to accent how brutal and violent this man could be.

“Ah, Kano’s over there...”

“Really, you just noticed...?”

“Yeah. Because I went to take this... eh? Eh...?”

“Ah, wait...!”

Just as Mary was raising the electronic massager thing above her head, the wire extending from it wrapped around her legs. She tripped over it, and the massager flew in the direction of the guy with the screwed-up stubble.

“Waaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Both Kido and I cried out loudly. We tried to grab hold of it, but it was futile as the massager still bonked the guy in the back of the head. Hard.

The face of the guy was twisted in pain. At that time Kido finally reached him and caught the massager just as it was about to fall on the floor. The three of us quickly ran back into a narrow corridor.

“Are you an idiot!? You wanna die or something!?”

“Eek... so, sorry~...”

“Ah~ just now, I thought we were going to die... even the image of a red light flashing passed through my head...”

Just as we sat down in the corridor, we heard the guy with the messy stubble causing a ruckus and cries coming from what was probably his subordinate.

Ah, really sorry Mr. Henchman... but I guess this is some sort of punishment for doing bad things...

After a while, Kido's phone that was with me temporarily began ringing with another message received from Kano.

"Subject: Everything looks fine~

Body: Your brother said if he gets an opportunity then the plan has a 100% chance of success! Ooh this is beginning to become more exciting by the minute! Speaking of which that thing earlier... that was great (laughs)."

I stretched out my head from the corridor to look in the direction of the hostages, only to see my brother who appeared to be intently searching for an opening, and Kano looking at us while giggling.

The text message also said this.

"Also I'm kind of getting bored so I think I'll head back now, ah, I've already told your brother what to say to the bearded guy the next time he does anything."

"Looks like there really is no problem. Let's continue with the mission!"

"Fine then, so... let's go...!"

"So that's how it is... I just don't feel like seeing that bearded guy anymore...!"

"Just don't think about doing anything, I've already told you earlier not to leave my side."

"Eh, um? I get it!"

Mary-chan grabbed onto the underside of Kido's jacket like earlier.

"Then let's go..."

"Yeah we should... wait a minute!? He's going to broadcast again!?"

As I was walking up to the central area, the second broadcast began.

"What...!? Isn't that a bit too fast...! Hey! Mary! Hurry up."

"Eh? Eh? What? -Ah!"

I set off first, while Kido half-pulled, half-dragged Mary over to the counter selling televisions.

Entering the large corridor once again, we found ourselves standing in the

opposite direction from the bearded man's group and the hostages.

On the wall on the right, dozens upon dozens of large televisions were on display.

"OK...! Now let's..."

But in that instant, the bearded man that we'd messed around with earlier grabbed my brother and lifted him up by his hair.

"O, Onii-chan..."

"Hey! What'll we do if you go over!? Regarding the plan earlier, you're the only one that knows the timing OK!?"

"...!!"

That was true. But my brother was being...!!

"...Ki, Kisaragi!"

"Eh...?"

Mary-chan unexpectedly grabbed onto my hand.

"I don't really understand but... it'll be fine!"

Mary-chan grabbed on even tighter, and said that while looking into my eyes.

"...Everything will be fine!!" As though that sentence had triggered something, all the noises around me suddenly faded away.

My eyes felt hot. It was like all the nerves in my body were suddenly concentrated at my eyes.

In my current state, I knew that no matter where everyone's 'attention' was, they would all be in my control.

"...Mm!"

I inhaled slowly, and began concentrating.

There were a total of nine terrorists on this floor. I knew where every single one of them was as well.

"Commander! The 42" television third from the left! That one first!"

“I get it. Mary, we’re about to go.”

“Oh, okay...!”

The three of us stood in a line under the previously specified television, and stretched out our hands towards it.

Now we just had to wait.

Where everyone’s ‘attention’ was, I knew better than anyone else.

“...Go...”

...Wait...not yet...! “A scumbag like you, go be a shut-in in a prison for life!”

He was clearly an absolutely unreliable brother, but he had his cool moments.

As his voice rang around the floor, everyone’s attention was focused at that spot.

Their ‘attention’, I would ‘capture’ all of it in this instant!

“Now! I’m begging you!”

We pushed the television onto the floor with a huge crash.

In that instant everyone’s attention was focused on the shattered TV.

As everyone looking at the television drew in a simultaneous breath, we pushed down the speakers below it as well.

“Now where!?”

“Now it’s... There! That shelf!”

“...Compared to attracting attention, that’s more like exacting revenge, isn’t it.”

“Heheh... I guess.”

The bearded man walked in our direction while carrying a pistol.

“Who’s there -!?”

“One, two!”

The shelf collapsed on the floor in accordance with my signal.

“What!?”

The products on the shelf that were being dumped onto the floor crushed the bearded man at the same time.

“And now...!”

Across from the fallen shelf, I spotted my brother who had stood up and began running.

He didn't notice us at all, and instead passed us by with a determined look on his face.

“- Now it's all up to you. Ene-chan.”

I mumbled to myself unconsciously.

There wouldn't be a reply, and I wasn't expecting one as well.

Hearing my brother calling out that kid's name, a flash of light shot past.

It all ends here, as I was thinking that...

- A gunshot rang out.

“...!?”

Looking back, I saw my brother collapse in front of a row of computers.

“..Eh...?”

“Dammit...! Those bastards actually...!”

Loud noises began ringing throughout the floor, and simultaneously all the shutters began rising up.

“...Onii-chan!”

Still lying on the floor, my brother didn't appear as if he was going to stand up.

Kano began moving closer to my brother.

“Hurry up Kisaragi-chan! The shutters are open! Go!”

“- !!”

The shutters had opened about twenty centimeters, and I could see the feet of the police squads that were preparing to storm the building.

Upon seeing that Kido raised her voice in panic.

The entire floor was in a maximum state of chaos.

A few terrorists pointed at the shutters, and began yelling something.

If we didn't take care of things now, when the shutters opened it would be a full-on firefight between the terrorists and the police, with possibly large amounts of casualties. "Kisaragi- !"

"I understand...!"

To save my brother, I would have to...!

"Mary-chan!"

"OK!"

"... Go!"

I lowered my head down, and dispelled the ability that Kido had been using on me since earlier.

In that instant I clearly felt that, including the terrorists, everyone's 'attention' was focused on me mindlessly, meaninglessly and without any particular reason or preference.

"... I'm Kisaragi, Kisaragi Momo. I'm 16 this year. – And I'm an idol!"

- Silence.

In that instant, I had stolen everyone's attention.

"It's all up to you now! ...Mary-chan!!"

Mary walked up in front of me.

It was a position that could block the vision of not just mine, but also everyone else's.

Mary-chan had 'met the eyes' of 'everyone' except the Dan, and spoke with her hair moving about and her eyes releasing a red glow.

"I'm sorry."

- That sentence was like a spell that stopped everyone around in time.

"Charge-! ...!?"

The shutters had opened completely and the sound of footsteps entered the room.

The police appeared to have entered.

But, both the hostages and the terrorists made no resistance whatsoever, and instead all of them were frozen while looking in the same direction.

However, there was nothing in that direction.

More correctly, no one could notice us.

“Blindfold’s over... huh.”

Kido appeared to have finally calmed down, and let out a long sigh.

Her eyes were red, and she was clearly exhausted.

“...! Onii-chan!”

I ran over to my collapsed brother. “...Kano!! How’s my brother!?”

Kano who was looking over at my brother, had an unfathomable expression that had never before appeared on his face.

“...Sadly...”

It can’t be...! How could this be...!!

“-Sadly, this guy apparently only got brushed slightly by a bullet then fainted, you know?”

My brother was talking unconsciously with a pained expression, “Please spare me... I’m sorry I don’t know what I was thinking...”

...Enough, and to think that I thought he looked cool earlier, I take everything back.

- An idiot brother is still an idiot brother.

Even after the police had arrested all the terrorists, they were unable to hide their surprise at the fact that they were all frozen in a fixed position. Also the hostages were frozen as well, unsurprisingly.

“Hey are you OK! Hey! Hey!?”

“A, anyway let’s just get all the terrorists first! Hey there’s one under that

shelf! Get him.”

As the police squad was running around the place, I was having a small celebration with Kido and Kano regarding the success of the mission.

“To think you would think up a plan like this. Have everyone’s attention on Mary or something.”

“No, I knew that my brother could open up the shutters, but I was worried about the ensuing firefight. Then, just as I was wondering how I could get everyone to stop moving around, I remembered how Kano had appeared to turn into stone...”

“Hmm, even an idiot gets to play a part I see.”

“Hey, you’re too much! Ah, Kido, did you see the photos? The photos.”

“Deleted.”

Anyway we could finally relax. The police had appeared to have taken care of everything, and the Dan was in a commotion.

“We did it... right?”

“Yeah... all because of you. Good job.”

“Eh? Nah... ehehe... wait, what about Mary-chan...”

I suddenly noticed that Mary-chan wasn’t with us and surveyed the surroundings, only to see an unbelievably bad situation unfold.

Mary-chan who was holding the electronic massager again, was being questioned by one of the police.

“”Waaaaaaahhhhh!!””

I cried out simultaneously with Kido.

“T, that idiot...! She went to put back that thing!”

“Ah... what, what should we do!? This is really bad right!?”

“Pfft... ah, that’s the massager that hit the bearded guy on the head earlier! But why is it that sort of thing... is it some sort of joke!? Eh... my stomach hurts, it hurts!”

“You shut the hell up! Argh... what should we do...”

Kano fell onto the floor after being punched by Kido yet again.

As that was going on, more and more policemen began gathering around Mary-chan.

Mary-chan who appeared that she was about to cry, was frantically trying to tell the police something.

“C, Commander... is Mary-chan pointing in our direction...?”

“Hey, you idiot stop it...”

“W, waaah!! They’re coming over!! Wait... Kano don’t get in the way!! Get up!!”

“My chest... Kido... punched...”

“You... get up! Ah...”

As Kido uttered that useless cry, one of the policemen tripped over Kano. He let out a shocked cry “Waaahh!” and fell onto the floor.

“Run...” “Run...”

“Let’s go!!” “Get out of here!!” I ran out with Kido, but before that I ran over to Mary-chan first.

As she was being questioned I grabbed onto her hand, after which Mary-chan detected our presence, and appeared much more at ease.

The remaining policemen yelled “Where are you going!? Wait up!!” while we ignored them and continued running.

But how would we...!!

As I was wondering about that, chaos ensued throughout the entire floor. Mary-chan’s enchantment appeared to have broken. All the policemen immediately directed their attention to the hostages and terrorists. Of course, Kido didn’t let the opportunity go to waste.

We probably appeared to be invisible again.

A policeman that looked back yelled in a shaken voice “They... they’re gone!?”

“Hey Kisaragi! We can’t stick around anymore! Get out!”

“O, OK!! Ah... but...!”

“...Hey Kano!! Go get Kisaragi’s brother!”

“Eh? That’s so troublesome... actually never mind, I totally feel like carrying that body. Yep.”

“Kano’s so disgusting...”

Thankfully Kano went to carry my brother due to Kido’s clenched fist.

My brother who was being carried by Kano, continued to sleep-talk sentences that made me want to stuff up my ears like “Eek... please spare me...”

“Ah! Right! ...Ene-chan! Are you there?”

I plugged out the phone connected to one of the computers and spoke into it, to hear the voice of a lively young girl reply.

“Oh!? That voice is Onee-san!! Eh!? You’re here to buy things as well!? How’s Master!?” (TL note: Tempted to leave it as Goshujin but that just sounds weird Romanized. Oh well.) “Uh, yeah... anyway we’ll talk later! Do you want to come with me first?”

“No problem!! Are we going to the amusement park?”

“N, no... we’re not going there...?”

“Hey! We’re leaving!”

“O, OK!!”

I left the shops behind me and ran towards the stairs.

Ah, what did we come here to do again... in the end we didn’t even get to buy my phone nor Mary-chan’s tea set.

...But never mind, at least we did it...

Looking at Mary-chan’s face, she appeared to be suffocating.

“Hey, Mary-chan.”

“W, what is it... Kisa... Momo-chan!”

“-! Today... I’m, really happy!”

Upon hearing that Mary-chan froze momentarily, then immediately giggled while saying “So am I.”

“... Thank you!”

“- Onee-san, Onee-san!!”

From within my pocket, Ene-chan’s voice drifted up.

“Eh? What is it Ene-chan?”

“Is that it...? Could this be the ‘yuri’ legends have spoken of...? Hey Onee-san –“

I turned off the cellphone’s power and shoved it as deeply into my pocket as I could.

“L... What’s so bad about lilies? They’re beautiful –“(TL note: Japanese culture class #4. Mary made an unintentional pun here, Yuri is the Japanese term for lesbians or shoujo-ai/girl’s love, which stems from the Japanese word for lilies.)

“N, nothing! Don’t think about it Mary-chan!”

“...?”

Sweat not generated from running dripped down my forehead. I felt that this rude characteristic of Ene-chan, would be right up my brother’s alley.

“OK, let’s go downstairs now!”

As we reached the stairs a loud sigh drifted from behind me.

“Ugh... do I really need to carry your brother down? Seven floors...!?”

“After the stairs we’ll be outside, you know.”

When faced with Kido’s words, even someone like Kano had an expression of utter despair on his face.

“Ughhhhhhh....”

“Kano I’m sorry about my brother... p, please walk slowly-“

“She was here! Momo-chan in person! I’m serious!!”

As I was about to suggest that we slow down our pace, I heard these voices

coming from the crowd of hostages, and looked at everyone else.

“She’s definitely around! She saved us all!!”

The commotion slowly grew larger, disregarding the warnings of the police.

“Looks like we... can’t slow down anymore?”

“I’m, I’m sorry... um...”

“Sigh... what kind of day is this...”

“I, I can’t take it...”

The sunlight coming in from the windows, was as bright as it was before.

It was probably still chokingly hot outside.

The cicadas were probably crying like idiots as well, and the heat haze must still be shaking about..

I felt somewhat saddened, but despite this it was very different from ‘what happened’ earlier.

August 14th, a special day like this,

- I, definitely won’t forget it.

Epilogue

Translated by Amesubs

Going back to today morning.

My awakening in the morning was so peaceful, and in no way strange or mysterious, so I had no warning of the major incident that I was about to experience.

Again, if I'd later "woken up in a hospital bed", it still might have made some sense.

However, when I woke up, there was even a medusa and a transparent human (?), and I was in a mysterious organization's hideout, and before I realized it, it seems I owed this organization my life, and for some reason my sister had somehow become a member of this group.

...If you're thinking "I've got no idea what this kid's talking about", don't worry.

Honestly I'm the one who's the most confused here.

My sister told me about the incident in full detail, and it was quite extraordinary. We even had a long question and answer session, but in the end I'm still pretty confused.

The only thing I got was that, when I tried talking to these people that my sister calls her friends, they were surprisingly nice.

Actually, it might be because I'd only ever talked to that software with her outrageous personality, that I might have greatly overestimated these guys.

Well, at the very least, the one called Kido seemed like a pretty normal person.

The breakfast she made was delicious, it seems like she has a homely side to her.

If you ignore the fact that she had a scary look in her eyes, she's probably the most decent out of all of us, myself included.

It was certainly quite a suspicious group, but it seems they were willing to help my sister concerning her troubles about her "eyes". Also, at the very least, this was the first time my sister had ever introduced other people as her "friends", and I myself soon felt comfortable around them.

However, the most troublesome was Ene.

When did she get so close to my sister...

She hasn't sent her the data of that treasured image, right...?

Ah...I feel like she might've... I'm scared...give me a break...my dignity as an older brother will...

Feeling worried that I might be exposed the whole time I was at the amusement part, to be blunt I couldn't remember much of what happened while everyone was playing around.

I just, as Ene constantly demanded, rode various rides.

But then again, this isn't bad once in a while, I suppose.

It's been a while since I've experienced something like this.

-

After we left the amusement part, we walked for a while.

But leaving that aside, the girl I was carrying on my back, how long had she been a shut-in? To think that there was actually someone with less strength than me...

"I'm really sorry. I didn't think that she'd get so excited that she'd actually collapse..."

"No, no, it's fine with Shintaro-kun! To carry a girl on his back is a once-in-a-

lifetime experience, no?”

“Really, since Onii-chan is a good-for-nothing and a 2D otaku, it’s really only a once-in-a-lifetime experience, right? Anyways, Ene-chan, the amusement park was so much fun, wasn’t it~!?”

“Yeaah! It was incredibly fun! Especially the part where Master threw up, that was the best! I’ll send everyone a picture when we get back!!”

“Ooh! Ene-chan you’ve got good sense~! Well then, I’ll send you Mary’s treasured image in exchange....”

“Ooooooh! Almond-eyes-san is pretty good too...! That’s fine with me!”

“St...stop....! Don’t show anyone...”

“Hey, if you’re awake, walk by yourself Mary. I’m sure Shintaro’s tired as well.”

“Ju..just a bit more...”

“Ahaha... huh, what’s that?”

“Hm?”

“...An accident?”

As we were walking on a small road leading off the main road, we caught sight of a crowd gathering right in front of a small park.

It seemed that the ambulance had just arrived, and the rescue members carried a stretcher down hurriedly, pushing their way through the crowd.

Through the gaps, I saw the figure of a young boy about the same age as me crouching near the middle of the crowd.

With his hands on the ground, he was looking at a young boy who was lying down with worry. I couldn’t see quite so clearly, but I’d say the collapsed boy seemed about 10 years old...?

“...He seems young.”

“Yeah. I wonder if he’s hurt...?”

Kido and Kano whispered.

The boy, although there were no noticeable outer signs, was limp and appeared to have lost consciousness...

However, there was nothing we could do about it.

As we passed through without staring too much, I noticed Ene's strange behavior.

"..!"

"...Ene-chan? What's wrong?"

"...Konoha...?"

"Huh...? What did you say? Ene?"

The young boy was carried to the ambulance, and the young man, accompanying him, got in as well.

The ambulance turned on its siren once again, and left the scene.

"...Little sister! Could you please chase after the person from just now?"

"W-Whaat!? Why!?"

"Please, quickly!! I beg you...!"

"O-onii-chan...!?"

"What's wrong, Ene? Did something happen?"

"...Why, why is he...?"

On the 15th of August at 5 in the afternoon, "Pantermast" resounded throughout the town...

-And so from here, our long, long "first day", began at long last.

Afterword: A story that makes one want to hide one's eyes

I'm Jin.

How did you guys feel about “Kagerou Daze –in a daze-“?

This time, since I wanted to write a light novel related to my first album, I selected the stories of four songs from it to become the central point of the novel.

Future novels will definitely feature other songs than this.

Well, if this novel isn't all that popular then who knows, the next novel might be something along the lines of “a schoolyard romantic comedy describing the normal but somewhat H lives of a group of girls” instead. (TL note: H is hentai. Perverted. I probably didn't need to say this.) ... That actually might be pretty good.

Yeah, I think I've already included the character names within this novel, probably going to name them after some flowers, I think I've got some pretty nice ones.

While researching I found that there's a type of rose called “Chinchin.”

What a beautiful name. (TL note: Jin you sick bastard. Chinchin, in this case チンチン, is pronounced in the same way as ちんちん, also Chinchin, the Japanese word for penis.) In Italian “Chinchin” appears to mean “Cheers” as well?

It must be because it sounds like glasses clinking together.

So anyway I wrote this light novel here, but the process was somewhat painful.

I thought I would die. Between making albums and the process of writing this novel, I had to prepare for live performances as well; I didn't even have time to admire the Chinchin. (TL note: Wow Jin has a pretty twisted sense of humor. The

original text has the words 愛でる in it, which could be interpreted to ‘I didn’t even get the time to admire the beautiful bougainvillea Chinchin, but he’s probably referring to the other meaning.) So this afterword, is like being released from the binds of a powerful curse, and I’m writing this while admiring the Chinchin.

Because I was admiring it too much, just writing up to this point took me two hours.

I’m sorry for writing so slowly.

Ah, of course, I was talking about the rose?

Well this is unnecessary, but on rose photo albums online I found that photos of the Chinchin had the tag “fragrant” on it. I have a feeling this is a pretty prized breed.

Ah, speaking of Chinchin, there’s a type of snack called Chinchin as well in Nigeria. Seems to be some sort of biscuit.

It must be great to even put it in food.

In Nigeria one could do something like “an afternoon simultaneously admiring the Chinchin while eating Chinchin...” well something along the lines of that, sounds like quite a relaxing scene...

...Ah! I’m running out of pages!

It appears that this afterword has gone pretty off-topic, so if I get the chance I’ll see you guys again on the afterword of the next volume. If I get the chance...!

So. Please support me from here on as well.

Jin (自然の敵 P/Shizen to Teki-P)